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Prologue

Despite the fact that it was supposed to be a cold summer this year, it's August and it's been bright and hot every day, with very little rain. I was going to stay at my grandpa's house in Nagayama for about two days, but after going to the pool at Shintomi park and having lunch at his house, I decide to go home. My grandpa in Nagayama is so energetic and cheerful, and while I love that about him, I can't keep up with doing judo practice every day. It's fine for a bit, but staying for a long time is painful.

It's sunny today. The sky is a deep blue with no clouds. The powerful sun is burning me, though. Even with a hat, you're likely to get heatstroke. Even so, it's now after 2pm. Just going home seems boring, so I decide to take a little detour on my way. My mom is just going to tell me to study if I go home, anyway.

There are two streets I particularly love in Asahikawa. First is Kaguraoka street. It stretches for several kilometres with platanus trees along the road the whole way. In this season, the new branches have a thick layer of leaves, so it feels like a big, green tunnel.

The other street I like is in Nagayama. In front of Nagayama shrine, there's a few temples and old trees. I don't know what kind of trees they are, but they're different from the kind in downtown Asahikawa. Somehow, looking at them makes me feel like I've slipped into the past.

On the way, there's an old, white mansion, near the Nagayama library and Daidou shrine. Maybe it's just because of the old building, but it always gives me a weird feeling when I pass by it. When I'm going home from my grandpa's house, I always go along this road. I really love this street. When I reach this street, I hop off my bike and walk instead.

After going to the pool, I feel like everything is suddenly changing. The air in front of me is shaking, like a mirage. I can hear the cicadas screeching. I'm sweating a lot… I know I have to go home now, but I suddenly remember meeting "her." That tall, slender woman. I passed by her as I was walking towards the Nagayama shrine, and she was walking away from it. She was wearing a white dress. She had a large hat, coloured the same pure white, with a wide rim. I thought she looked like a neat, proper person.

I remember the white mansion I just passed by. She looks like the kind of lady who would live there. Even just walking by her felt like the air around me shifted. I was captivated. Then, the wind suddenly picked up. The gust was strong enough to blow her hat away, so she held it down. Her long, dark hair blew in the wind, and her dress clung to her. I was flustered from seeing that. I could see her face, since her hat was pushed aside. She was just as- no,

more beautiful than I'd imagined. I was too busy staring at her that the next strong gust of wind blew me off balance.

"Oh!"

I quickly tried to catch myself, but my bike fell over. I felt guilty for making so much noise. I looked over and saw her looking back at me, smiling. Did she realize I was staring at her? I didn't know if it was me, or the strong wind, but she said, "that surprised me."

All I cared about was her smile. It was directed at me. Her smile was so bright, it was almost sparkling. Then, the wind blew once again. A strong gust. She kept walking ahead, ignoring the headwind. I was frozen in place. Eventually, she disappeared into the white mansion.

It was like I was hallucinating. I felt like I was dreaming. It would have been a lovely dream. Just remembering it makes me feel warm, like the summer sun.

That was during summer break, when I was in my third year of middle school. At that time, I didn't know anything about Sakurako-san. Not what kind of person she was, about her obsession, or how she'd change my life.

First Bone: The Woman Digging Up the Earth

Part 1

It's January, the middle of a frigid winter. On the last Sunday of January, I'm alone at my usual tea shop.

"It's so cold today," a woman sitting near me says.

Perhaps because of the strong wind during the day, the shop is quiet, and not too crowded. Rather than my usual tea, I order hot milk with bittersweet, fragrant caramel sauce that's made inhouse.

Rikubetsu is the coldest city in Japan, but the temperature there is often only a few degrees colder than in Asahikawa. The average temperature there gets as low as -20 celsius. It's the kind of coldness that feels stabbing and piercing.

I drink a mouthful of my hot milk, and let out a sigh. My phone, which is in silent mode, vibrates on the table. It's an email.

"Isn't the highway closed? Did you make it back to Asahikawa safely?"

The sender is worried about the bus I took home. Although the highway wasn't closed due to the snowstorm, the bus arrived in Asahikawa nearly 40 minutes late. I'm tired, so I respond saying I'm stopping by a tea shop. Soon, I get another email notification.

"It was cold in Sapporo today, wasn't it? You should rest when you get home. Fatigue lowers the effectiveness of your immune system. When it's cold, the human body needs to burn much more energy to maintain your internal temperature. You become exhausted much easier. Sleep is the best way to recover from exhaustion, so don't stay up late tonight. Your

parasympathetic nervous system also releases more grown hormones while you sleep. Sleep is important. You need a good night's sleep in order to grow good bones."

I reply saying that I'll go to bed early tonight.

The name of the sender is "Phantom". Phantom is my new friend. We met over social media while I was hospitalized. All I know is their screen name, and that they probably live in Hokkaido. I don't know their gender. However, they have extensive knowledge of human anatomy, crimes, and forensic pathology, among other things. We became fast friends after exchanging email addresses. Their eagerness to discuss technical topics is only contained by the character restrictions on the messages. They seem to have a lot of free time, even on weekdays.

While I was in the hospital, we often watched the same variety show on the same channel and talked about that, but now we talk about incidents that have occurred. Phantom's deductions always surprise me. Phantom is always worried about me. Whenever I didn't fully understand something the doctor said to me, I'd ask Phantom about it, and they would explain exactly what was happening to me and how it would heal. When I woke up with a nightmare, they spent hours messaging with me in the middle of the night until I could fall asleep again. They're my own personal friend.

Honestly, I think I might know who Phantom actually is. Who else is a 'ghost' that always calls me "boy"? Every time I think about that, my chest feels warm.

'Your body isn't just your own. You have to take care of it. I sincerely want you to grow a set of healthy bones.'

I couldn't help but smile when I saw that email. Phantom is sometimes overprotective of me… But maybe that's because I'm a substitute for "Soutarou-kun."

I take a sip of milk while I watch the snow gently fall outside the window. The sweetness warms my whole body. While I'm enjoying the gentle sweetness, the waiter places a chiffon cake on the table next to me.

"Hm?"

"Were you in the hospital? How are you doing? Do you have an appetite?" The owner of the cafe says. Apparently that's an extra service.

"I'm already fine." I nod in thanks. He smiles at me.

"That girl you're always with, Kujo-san, seemed to be worried about you. I'm glad to see you're fine," The owner says with a smile.

I guess this is my first time visiting this place since I got discharged, after all.

"It was just an injury, so it really is fine already. Sorry to worry you."

"Don't worry about it. Since you were only injured, was it boring?"

"Yeah, it was. The food was the worst part, though. I just wanted to eat some freshly cooked meat."

Phantom helped with the boredom. After all, it was the food that caused the most pain during my hospital stay. All I got were light meals, I really just wanted something substantial to eat. I wanted a rich bowl of ramen, and most of all, a piping hot cutlet. The cutlets my grandma makes are especially delicious. Crispy breading, thick, chewy pork, juice that overflows as soon as you bite into it, the sweet fat… The heat from the oil and the scent of the steam filled the living room while she fried the pork.

My mouth is watering. Cutlets are good when they're cold too, but there's nothing quite like putting sauce on a steaming hot, crispy cutlet. It's just fried meat with breading, but it's earth shattering. I don't think there's any other complete dish that's as simple as a cutlet. The runner-up would be fried shrimp.

"Hahaha, just what you'd expect from a growing boy."

After my discharge, my desire for cutlets was not only satisfied by my grandma, but my mom also bought me a cutlet sandwich as a present. In the past, Asahikawa station had a shop that sold cutlet sandwich lunch boxes. They were my dad's favourite food.

"But really, I'm relieved to see you're doing well… you're alone today, did something happen? I was worried, but you seem to be in a good mood."

"...I took the express bus to Sapporo today. It took longer than usual because of the weather, so I'm tired… So, I thought I'd have some tea before heading home."

The shopkeeper happily smiles at my explanation. "In that case, take your time," he says before returning to the counter.

It's not a lie. It's true that I'm really tired today. I went to Sapporo today. I visited the hospital where Sakurako-san's uncle, the former professor Shitara, is hospitalized. When I saw how much equipment he's hooked up to, I realized his condition is worse than I thought.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. A disease that causes the muscles throughout your body to atrophy until you can't move. Unfortunately, there isn't a cure. What's even more surprising is that even in his condition, he hasn't mentally succumbed to his illness. Even through a device, he's still the same uncle that Sakurako-san loves and respects. Even now, forensics students or the police will come to him for advice. Apparently he's even working on making a new atlas of human anatomy, too.

Because of his condition, I could only stay and talk with him for about an hour. We talked about a lot of things. We talked about Sakurako-san, and Soutarou-kun. What he told me wasn't a very happy story. It made me sad to hear. I don't think I could go back and pretend like nothing happened. It's like reality has suddenly hit me. That's why I decided to stop here.

I actually really miss having gran's tea, but right now, I'm not allowed to visit the Kujo house. No matter how much I want to talk face to face with her, Sakurako-san won't let me.

It's strange. I've only known her for a year, but she's become such an important person to me. In that time, she's changed me. If I hadn't met her, I wouldn't be here anymore.

The way the shop is so quiet, and smells like tea reminds me of her house. This atmosphere makes me start remembering the past. The first time I spoke to her, and the first time the two of us found a corpse.

Part 2

In the fall of my third year of middle school, I spent my days feeling hazy. I didn't have a real purpose. I didn't have any kind of goal or anything. I decided to go to a high school that wasn't too difficult for me. I chose that school because I heard my close friend since I was in elementary school, Imai, was going to Meisei high school. Since he had to move, we ended up going to different middle schools. I thought it would be nice if we got into the same school. Imai

chose that school because they have a strong tennis club, but I didn't have any particular reason to go there. I never did anything in particular. I played the saxophone as a hobby, but I wasn't good enough to continue doing it as an activity in high school.

Every day was the same. Boring, stagnant, like I was just passing my time until I died. My grandma, who I loved the most, had passed away, and my older brother had moved to Tokyo, so maybe I was just lonely. Anyway, I was just pointlessly wasting day after day, lethargic. I didn't have something in particular I was unhappy about, and I wasn't angry. But various things were slightly irritating, and every day was boring.

That day, I was visiting my grandpa. He would sometimes call me when he was doing a judo class and half-forced me to practice. I'm not interested in violent things, but when my grandma prepared such delicious dinners, my appetite always won, and I couldn't refuse. Eating rice after working up a sweat in the dojo is something special.

My mom hates natto, and won't allow it in the house, so I was happy to see natto miso soup on the menu, along with pork cutlets. They're the best. It made me want to go back every week. However, I had to study for high school entrance exams. Although my grades weren't a problem, it's reckless to attempt an entrance exam without studying at all.

Since it was already getting dark, I finished my dinner quickly, put my dishes in the sink, and grabbed my jacket.

"Well, I'm heading home."

"Okay. If the weather is good next week, I'm going to the mountain with Jii-chan for a walk to look for mushrooms. If you're bored, you can come with us," My grandpa yells down the hallway just as I reach the front door.

My three grandpas are kind of like my parents, in a way. In middle school, even though it wasn't that long ago, I would go visit every day off. Honey fungus and larch bolete are both edible, delicious mushrooms. It's become a tradition to go fishing, mountain climbing, and mushroom hunting with one of my other grandpas every year. But somehow, lately it's felt like a bother.

"Yeah… well, if I don't have any plans." I give a vague response. I didn't feel like putting in the effort to outright refuse.

"Recently you've been acting like a fully-fledged member of society." My grandpa said, pouting. Since he practices judo, he's so fit that you wouldn't think he's over 70 already.

"It can't be helped, right? After all, you're going to be taking entrance exams this year, Shou-chan." My grandma came to my rescue.

My grandma, who is 10 years younger, is quiet, unlike my ferocious grandpa. By the way, the two of them aren't related to me by blood. They're from my older brother's mom's side of the family. Unlike my grandpa who doesn't think about anything too deeply, my grandma always seems to know what other people are thinking and feeling. It scared me a little in the past. She was never mean, she's always kind. She always acted reserved, so I always got the feeling that she thought of me as "someone else's child."

"The exam won't be that hard, right? So why don't you just play instead?"

Unlike my grandma, my grandpa never acted reserved. She nudged him with her elbow to get him to stop.

“Well, I can at least ask your jazz grandpa to come with me if you’re too busy, right? I’d be lonely if someone didn’t go with me. Actually, isn’t it the anniversary of your grandma’s death soon, too?”

Usually the relationship between my three grandpas is a delicate situation. On my dad’s side of the family, I have a grandpa who likes things like mountain climbing and fishing, who you just can’t hate; and a grandpa in Nagayama who can be a bit rude, but likes cooking and jazz music. On my mom’s side, my grandpa is pretty fashion conscious, but I don’t see him very much. My Nagayama grandpa was alone. On my mom’s side, my grandpa has an awkward way of expressing kindness.

“Yeah… I know.” I gave a meek nod. My grandpa ruffled my hair with his big hand.

“It’s going to get dark soon, will you be okay? We can at least take you halfway there” My grandma said, sounding worried. As I head to the entrance and put on my parka, all I can think is ‘I’m not a kid anymore…’

“I’ll be fine, I’m going into high school soon, remember?” I accidentally let a sarcastic laugh out.

“I guess so… but they say there’s a kidnapper in this area..**”**

“But that was decades ago, right?”

Asahikawa and Nagayama have a long history. You often hear stories and urban legends like that. As far as I know, nobody has actually been hurt. Sometimes I see that there’s been a pervert around or something in the news, though, but that isn’t limited to just Nagayama.

All I can think of is one woman in particular. That’s right. There’s someone who definitely isn’t normal around here.

“Aren’t you cold? Are you okay with just a jacket?” My grandma continued to worry about me. She seemed really worried about me going home.

“I’ll be fine. Dinner was delicious, grandma. Thanks.”

On the inside, I was starting to feel irritated again, but I kept it to myself and thanked my grandma. My grandma smiled awkwardly. Is she not happy?

“Anyway, be careful on your way home. Don’t listen to music or play on your phone while you walk. Watch where you’re going, look out for cars and people, and—“

While standing in the entrance with my shoes on already, she kept bombarding me with things even little kids know. I was filled with the urge to run away and escape. But then, she suddenly stopped talking.

The intercom rang. My grandma opened the door without taking the chain off.

“Oh, the neighbours.” She took off the chain, and opened the door fully.

“Excuse me, but is Yachi-san here?”

The first voice was a woman in her late thirties. She was wearing a polo shirt, comfortable pants, and a name tag that says “Harada”.

“Yachi-san… left the home again?”

It seems that she knows my grandma.

“Yeah…” Harada-san’s expression clouds.

“Should we look together? Or contact the police?”

“No, not yet. I’ll check the apartment first.” Harada-san replied. My grandpa sighed.

“I’ll take a look around the area. We should let the head of the neighborhood association know.”

“What happened?”

My grandpa headed to the entrance and put on his coat. Harada-san seemed impatient and pale. I asked my grandpa a question. Somehow the atmosphere feels uneasy.

“Do you remember Yachi-san from the apartment next door? The one who often gave you candy when you were little?”

“Ah, yeah. The old lady next door…”

“She was moved to a nursing home the year before last… lately, she’s started to develop dementia.” My grandma continued. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her recently. “Last time she escaped the home, she was sitting in front of the apartment.”

In other words, the old lady that lived next door slipped out of the nursing home and disappeared.

“I’ll help look, too, then,” I said. It was a serious situation. I know this person, so I would have been worried if I didn’t help.

“You can’t. Go hurry home. Your mom is going to worry about you.”

“But…”

My grandmother wouldn’t give in. I thought it would be better to have more people helping.

“You have to watch your curfew. Parents don’t care if you’re 5, 10, or 20 years old, they don’t change. They’ll still worry about you just the same.”

“...Okay.” I gave up after hearing how resolute she was. Besides, if we kept arguing, they’d take longer to find Yachi-san.

“Well, I’ll keep an eye out on my way home.”

“Thanks.” Harada-san bowed to me.

My grandma stayed to talk to the police, while my grandpa and I left the house. Before I crossed to the other side of the street, my grandpa told me, “be careful on your way home,” and patted my head. I hopped onto my bike while I tried to fix my hair that he messed up. The bike I got when I was in elementary school was getting too small for me.

“...”

I remembered when I first rode my bike to my grandpa’s house, the old lady next door said, “that’s a really nice bike.” I don’t think she told me to watch out for cars, and be careful not to fall over, too. I guess she wasn’t a very talkative person. I remembered that she offered my brother and I fruit jelly, and fruit juice popsicles when we were playing outside, too. It didn’t seem like Yachi-san had any grandchildren, so maybe that’s why she was always so nice to us. I was really worried about her.

‘What if she isn’t in the neighbourhood?’ I thought.

I kept peddling my bike, trying to take in my surroundings. Then, a certain woman popped into my head. The same woman I passed in front of the Nagayama shrine. There was a mansion behind a row of old trees by the shrine. When I went to my grandpa’s house, I sometimes went that way. I liked how it had a different atmosphere compared to other places in Asahikawa. I met “that person” for the first time there. She was so beautiful I thought she was a

ghost. So, every time I visit my grandpa's house, I take a detour on the way home. Somehow, I still wanted to see her again. But after a few weeks, I realized what I was imagining was wrong.

Next time I saw that woman, she had received a package. A man in work clothes stopped his car in front of her house, who I figured was the delivery man. They seemed to be talking happily through the open window. At first, I didn't know if the person was a man or a woman, but I soon realized that the one standing there in a men's dress shirt and jeans was a beautiful woman. A beautiful woman is charming no matter what she wears. It was lucky that I got to see her again. As I happily walked by, a horrible stench suddenly made me sick to my stomach.

"Ugh"

It smelled rotten. The stench of rotting meat. An intense, overwhelming stench of kitchen waste. I don't want to think about what's causing such a stench, but apparently it's in the cardboard box that the woman is holding. How is she so calm when it smells so bad? What's inside of it, anyway? They were walking towards the car.

"Woah!" Suddenly, I heard a voice.

Apparently she missed a step on the entranceway stairs**.** Splat. There was an unpleasant sound as "something" flew out of the box.

"...?!"

I didn't know exactly what it was. But… It was a lump with fur. Startled, I looked back at her, and saw her taking nitrile gloves out of her pocket, and snapping them against her wrists. I was really surprised. She put the "thing" back in the box, and disappeared into her house. Just before she went through the gate, our eyes met for a moment. She looked like she was laughing, but I must have imagined it.

As I timidly approached the gate, I noticed the dark blood on the ground giving off that rotting stench. I gulped, and ran away, panicked. It was something weird that I shouldn't have seen. It didn't even feel real. The white mansion, dark green garden, a woman in a white shirt, blood dripping…

After that, I stopped taking that path. I was scared, I didn't want to see anything like that again. I saw something that I shouldn't have, I'm embarrassed to say it, but at the time I thought she might not have even been a creature of this world, like some kind of occultic monster.

Even though I was supposed to be looking for Yachi-san, I couldn't help but think of that woman. I mustered all my courage, and rode my bike up to the front of that white mansion. I didn't see anyone, and I couldn't smell blood. For a moment, I thought I saw a white figure in front of the gate at the shrine in the distance. Of course, I couldn't make out any details from where I was. But somehow, my intuition said "it's her." Next to her was a smaller figure.

I started pedalling as fast as I could. I got stuck waiting for traffic, but I kept my sights set on that figure as it flickered behind the trees. I was determined to not lose sight of it. I finally managed to cross the road, then dropped my bike on its side so I could run up to the figures.

"Yachi-san!" I shouted as loud as I could. Both people looked at me, and as I expected, it was "her." "PI… Please hand that person over!" My voice was trembling after rushing over so fast. It wasn't just because I had to catch my breath, I was also scared.

That day, "she" was wearing an all white dress. Her black hair clearly stood out against the setting sun behind her.

“Who are you?” ‘She’ said. Her voice sounded a bit husky.

“Yachi-san! You shouldn’t do this! Please go back with me!”

I ignored her, instead grabbing Yachi-san’s arm and trying to pull her towards me. Her white cardigan fell to the ground. It looked like she was just wearing her pajamas.

“You must be cold.” The ‘woman in white’ said, gently patting the dirt off the cardigan and placing it back on Yachi-san’s shoulders.

Yachi-san mumbled something about losing it.

“What did you do to her?”

“Nothing. I just noticed that she was staggering when she walked. Do you know her? That’s good, then,” she said, breathing a sigh of relief. Her voice sounded masculine, despite her ladylike clothes.

“Let’s go, Yachi-san.”

I couldn’t tell what that ‘woman in white’ was thinking. But it was good that I got Yachi-san back. After we walked a bit further away, I checked her over to make sure she was really okay. Fortunately, she wasn’t injured.

“-To go.”

“What?”

“I have to go.”

“Go...?”

She muttered to herself, then started walking back towards the shrine. I tried to grab her hand, and noticed it was covered in mud.

“She was digging under that cherry blossom tree over there.” The ‘woman in white’ told me.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” Yachi-san pulled on my arm, then sat on the ground while repeating that to herself.

That must have made my look like a bad person.

“Yachi-san, the worker at your home and my grandparents are worried about you, so let’s go back, okay?”

I didn’t have any other choice but to crouch next to her, and try talking to her. I tried to talk slowly and nicely as I could. But she just kept repeating “I’m sorry,” and ignored me, like she couldn’t even hear me. I decided to try calling my grandpa’s house, and my grandma picked up. I told her that I found Yachi-san, and she was happy, but she also scolded me for not letting her know right away. After ending the call, I noticed that the ‘woman in white’ was gone. I looked around, and noticed her walking away by herself in the dark.

Part 3

Harada-san brought Yachi-san back. Fortunately, besides her blood pressure being a little high, she was fine. They phoned my grandpa’s house later.

Yachi-san — Hatsue Yachi-san had been escaping from the home like that for several months. She always acted worried, and dug in gardens with her hands. The staff were troubled

by it, too. Even in the home they can't watch her 24/7, and they don't want to have to restrain her. Hatsue-san never got married, and her parents and siblings had already passed. She had no family left. She had to rely on the nursing home. My grandma said, "I'd want to go home, too," with a lonely expression.

On the weekend three weeks later, I went back to my grandpa's house in Nagayama. He wanted me to set up his computer and wireless router since he just got a new internet connection. I wasn't really good with computers, but fortunately most things can be done pretty easily by looking at the manual. It felt manageable. But my grandma called me on Saturday morning.

"Shou-chan, could I take up a bit of your day today?"

"Why? Did something happen?" I was scared, my grandma sounded so panicked.

Both of my grandparents are pretty old. They're at an age where you're always worried that they could get sick or hurt.

"Yachi-san disappeared again."

"Really? Again?" I was relieved that nothing happened to either of them. However, I couldn't really call Yachi-san disappearing again good news.

"Both of us are going to go search."

"Wait! I'll go too…"

She hung up before I could finish talking. I couldn't just pretend like I hadn't heard anything, so I took my bike and rushed out. Unfortunately, she wasn't at the shrine this time.

"..."

That's right, I guess the people from the home probably searched here first. The question was, where was she then? I looked around while my mind raced. I remembered that woman in white.

I mustered all my courage and rode my bike up to that white mansion. The gate was open. I tried to move as quietly as possible as I timidly peeked into the garden. I knew it's not right to sneak into someone else's house, but I couldn't curb my curiosity. The garden was huge. I figured it wasn't taken care of often, since the trees were overgrown. The garden looked like it was slowly starting to turn from lush green to brown, as fall was coming soon.

In the middle of the garden, under the shade of a big cherry tree, was that beautiful woman again wearing a white shirt. It looked like she was boiling something in a big metal drum. An unpleasant smell drifted towards me, so I plugged my nose. Then, I saw her pull something out of the drum with a pair of cooking tongs. She held it in both her hands.

"Ee-" I was so surprised that I couldn't help but let a scream out.

With a smile, she pulled a bone out of the pot. A big bone. They must have been from a big animal, or maybe a human. I wanted to run away, but my knees felt weak. My throat ached with every breath. I was so scared that I was almost crying. Again, I saw something I couldn't unsee. After all, there's definitely something wrong with that woman! It'd be fine if it were a dream, but it wasn't. This wasn't the work of a ghost. The sky was still bright.

With shaking hands, I called the police. It wasn't the first time she'd been reported. I was so nervous that I couldn't give them the address, but they said the police would be there right away. I couldn't just leave it to the police, so I hid in the bushes at the temple nearby. I wanted the police to get there soon, before the woman destroyed the evidence. I desperately hoped.

The police only took about 10 minutes to arrive, but while waiting, it felt so much longer. Soon, 2 or 3 patrol cars showed up, and about 8 police officers went up to the house. I don't know what they spoke about. However, I think they made it in time. The officers came out of the house faster than I expected. Do they need to call for backup so they can arrest her? But then, one police car drove away, then another. The police were leaving. What happened?

"E-excuse me!" When the police were about to get into the last car, I jumped out of the bushes.

The two police officers were wearing heavy jackets. They let go of the batons on their waists, and looked at me strangely.

"Do you know the people who live here?"

"Know them..." They glanced at each other for a moment, and hesitated.

When I told the two young officers that I was the one that reported that woman, they took on a troubled expression.

"It's personal information, so we can't talk about it, but that person isn't committing any crimes."

"Huh? But!"

"It's fine, there's nothing illegal about it. Thank you for your cooperation." The officers seemed a little bothered, but they spoke politely, then returned to the police car.

"That can't be…"

I watched as the black and white car drove away. I didn't move for a little while.

There definitely is something wrong with that woman. Did the police actually do a proper investigation? Maybe they didn't look in the garden? I realized that I was trembling. But I'm sure of what I saw. I couldn't just leave it like that. I didn't have a particularly strong sense of justice. I didn't want to shame my great grandpa, who always upheld the belief that someone should always be honest, diligent, and fair. I wanted to live like that, too. It's not like I wanted to be a hero or anything. I didn't want to stand out, but I hated regretting things later. Whether it was my regret, or someone else's. Even when I was still in middle school, I knew that having regrets was unavoidable in life. Even if regrets are inevitable, I'd still rather avoid them as much as possible. No matter how much someone wants to convey something, some things just can't be expressed in words. I didn't want anyone to feel that kind of regret, neither myself or a stranger.

Anyway, did that bizarre person really kill Yachi-san? No, maybe they're someone else's bones and she's next. I mustered all my courage one more time, and walked up to the gate of that house. I looked into the garden, but she wasn't there. She probably went back inside after the police showed up. Should I run away after all? I had to fight my urge to leave as I walked up the weed-covered stone path, and up to the old fashioned entranceway.

The window above the door was beautifully crafted stained glass. This house must have a long history. Unfortunately, there was a monster lurking inside of it. I rang the intercom, my hands still trembling. The sound was muffled, but it sounded a bit different from other intercoms I'd heard. That woman slammed the door open, angrily yelling, "what do you want?!"

"Oh…" I froze up.

"...It's you. You're the boy from before, right?" She stood right in front of me. She was taller than me. It gave her an even more intimidating presence.

"Uh, I wanted to speak with you."

“With me?”

“Uhh…”

“-Who is this?” An older woman with a hoarse voice poked her head up.

“It’s not the police, gran.”

“Oh…”

The woman called “gran” was wearing white clothes and an apron. Her hair was completely white, and her smile made wrinkles on her face. I couldn’t tell how old she was. She was probably older than my grandparents. Maybe even older than Yachi-san. The woman looked over at me, looking surprised. I wondered if it was rare to have visitors there.

“Come talk inside. You can’t just stand here.” The older woman said. The younger woman sighed, and looked dissatisfied. “If you’re going to talk, do it inside. You’re going to bother the neighbours.”

The older woman disappeared into the hallway. Before I entered the house, I took a look over my shoulder. Aren’t these people dangerous? I didn’t know what these two’s true intentions were, and the older woman could even be an accomplice. I figured I had to stay on my guard. I was so nervous that my mouth felt dry.

“That’s right. If this is going to take a while, let’s go inside,” the woman in white said as she watched the older woman walk away.

“Huh? I can’t! Right here is fine!”

“It’ll be too noisy outside, so at least let me close the door. I wouldn’t want gran to scold me.” The woman said, shrugging her shoulders. It seemed like she was scared of the older woman.

I really didn’t want my only escape route to be cut off… I reluctantly stepped inside and let her close the door.

“So what did you want to talk about?” The woman asked.

I took a deep breath, then looked at her. I had to stand my ground.

“Are you… Hiding Yachi-san here?”

“That old woman from before? Did she disappear again?”

“Don’t play dumb with me!”

She responded so plainly that I had to talk more firmly.

“I… saw it.”

“Saw what?”

“You in the garden, boiling something in a metal drum…”

“Oh?” She said in a low voice, and raised one eyebrow.

“Then you’re the one who called the police… oh well. Then, what do you think it was?”

“...Bones, I think.” I gulped again. “You had large bones, so I thought that maybe… they were from a human.” My throat felt tight. She bursted out laughing. “There’s nothing funny about this!”

“Sorry… it’s just too funny. It’s true that they were bones. However, they weren’t from a human,” she said, still laughing.

Honestly, there’s nothing funny about this situation.

“I see, wait here for a minute.” The woman said, and climbed up the stairs. She came back with a large cardboard box. “These bones are far too big to be human.”

She dropped the box on the floor. Then, like a child looking for a toy, she opened the lid with a grin on her face. Then, she pulled out a large, white bone.

“Let’s see… was this it?”

“T-that’s it!”

The bone she showed me looked up just like the one I saw her pulling out of the drum. A pure white piece of bone without a speck of flesh left. A chill ran up my spine.

“It’s a femur from a Yezo sika deer.”

“Huh? A deer?”

“That’s right, a deer. If you think about the thickness- ah, it’s too annoying to explain. Stand up.” She snorted and motioned for me to go over to her.

“But!”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to eat you.” She sounded like she was starting to lose her patience.

I didn’t have much of a choice, so I timidly took off my shoes. The woman guided me through the hallway. After turning a corner, we arrived at the living room. It had a low ceiling, like a lot of older houses seem to have.

“Ugh…”

“Well? Aren’t they beautiful?”

I felt like I couldn’t breathe, and it definitely wasn’t because I thought it was beautiful.

“W… What is… this?”

“These are all skeletons I put together.” The woman said, sounding proud of herself.

“Skeletons…?”

The entire living room was covered in a lot - and I mean a lot - of bones. On tables, above the fireplace, above the TV, on bookshelves, on the walls… Every surface was covered in animal skeletons. Although they were all assembled properly, I had no idea what animal any of them belonged to. I could only distinguish if it was a snake, fish, or bird. I couldn’t tell what any of the four legged animals were. It was a truly bizarre scene.

“Constructing these is my job, more or less. Not that it makes much money. My job is to take the bones from animals that have already died and make them into specimens like this.”

“Specimens?”

“That’s right. You sometimes see resin or silicon models, but when you see skeletons at schools or zoos, they’re usually hand made by someone like me.”

“Then… That time, you were…”

“That time? How many times have you peeked at my work? Honestly, you’re a bad kid. But a child’s intellectual curiosity is a precious thing. If you need help, just tell me next time.” She said happily.

I was glad she didn’t get mad about me sneaking into her yard.

“Then when you got a dead animal from that car… it was for this.”

“Car…? Oh, that was a spider monkey corpse. It was from my acquaintance who works at the Asahiyama Zoo. Though, when I make specimens for them, they always end up getting damaged from UV rays. Every time one breaks, they always want a new one right away, so it keeps me busy.” She said, smiling. “I see. So in other words, you thought I was a bizarre person

to watch out for. When you saw me with the deer bones in the yard, you thought I had killed the old woman you're looking for."

Even though she wasn't saying anything funny, she started laughing loudly. Her smile looked so innocent that it made me think she was cute for a moment.

"Honestly! I thought something like this would happen one day!" Just then, the elderly woman appeared with a tray in her hands.

"It's no problem. I haven't committed a crime."

"The rest of society doesn't think that. There's only a handful of people who can understand the young lady's academic interests." Gran, or perhaps I should say the maid or something, bluntly scolded the woman.

Apparently the elderly woman is higher in the pecking order than her. The elderly woman said "sorry about all of this," as she handed me some tea. I was a bit taken aback at first, but the elderly woman encouraged me to sit on the couch. I glanced around at all the skeletons while I drank my tea.

"Did you… really make all of these yourself?"

"This isn't all of them. However, I did make all of these. Strip off the skin, boil it to remove the flesh, degrease it, then coat it in chemicals. The procedure itself is simple, but it's delicate work."

I guess it's best not to touch them. She happily began explaining about the specimens. She hugged the body bag that was on her lap to her chest while she spoke. It was creepy.

"Don't you think they're beautiful? Bones are strong enough to support a living creature. It's not an exaggeration to say they support all life. The bones remain until the end. Bones are a symbol of life, and the manifestation of death."

I don't know how she can talk about bones so passionately. How am I supposed to respond when she says something like "don't you think so?" I don't think bones are beautiful at all. I felt sick thinking about my late grandma. My grandma's body was burned down to just a pile of bones. I've heard that in some cultures they have a custom of picking up the brittle, white pieces left behind afterwards. I don't know how someone can do something like that to their family. Bones are dead. Corpses. I also don't understand how this woman can be so happy about something so sad, as if they're toys. Even if she isn't a murderer, I still don't think she's a decent person.

I don't know whether it was disgust or anger that appeared on my face, but she suddenly pouted and said "well, unfortunately not everyone can understand it. Unfortunately, that Yachi woman isn't here. I just happened to meet her that day. If you don't believe me, you can search the house all you want. Gran can show you around."

"..."

Amidst the old fashioned furniture, the woman who sat in a more modern chair spoke with a pompous tone. She looked so carefree. I was bewildered. After she put up so little resistance, I didn't want to look around her house. I didn't really trust her, but at the very least, these people don't seem like kidnappers.

"Well, do as you like. You should drink your tea, it's good. What's your name?" She asked after I stayed silent for a while.

"It's Shoutarou."

The tea was hot, but after adding milk, it was just the right temperature. I was starting to get thirsty, so it really hit the spot. I gave the woman my name while drinking the tea. I didn't want to say my last name, so I just gave my first name.

"...What?" The woman froze and asked me to repeat myself.

"Shoutarou. Shoutarou Tatewaki." I repeated reluctantly.

"Shou… tarou?" The woman kept repeating it as if she had just heard something extremely upsetting.

Is my name that unusual? Sure, it's a little old fashioned and simple, but I'm pretty happy with it.

"Is it that weird?" I asked.

I noticed that gran was also staring at me strangely. The atmosphere of the room suddenly started to feel weird. I didn't like it.

"Um… What is it?"

"No, it's nothing. I just thought it was a nice name. I'm Sakurako Kujo, the owner of this house. This is gran, she helps me out. The two of us are the only ones who live here, so you don't need to worry." The woman suddenly introduced herself.

Apparently she was trying to welcome me? She took a sip of the tea she had been holding. Her tea cup was completely white. I think… It was bone china. Which means it was made of bones, doesn't it? I drank the last of my tea.

"Um… I can't really afford to relax right now. Yachi-san is still missing. Thank you very much for the tea." I put my cup back on the saucer and stood up.

Unfortunately, gran said, "you're going home already?" I guess that was because they don't get many visitors. I'm sure it's hard for them to invite regular guests to a room like that.

"Wait a second." I bowed to gran and started to leave, but Kujo-san grabbed my arm.

"I'm kind of in a hurry."

"I know that. Are you sure you should be looking for her recklessly? Didn't you come here because you didn't have anywhere else to look?" She was right on the mark. She grinned. "Let me give you some wisdom."

"Wisdom?"

"Yeah. That elderly woman was talking about the torii at the shrine."

I knew they were talking about something. I put my bag down on the sofa and decided to listen, since she seemed eager to talk about it.

"Why was she talking about that?"

"I don't know. When she saw the torii, she said they had been repainted. She said they weren't the right colour. This is just my theory, but… She probably mistook it for a different shrine."

"The wrong colour? The torii at the Nagayama shrine are reddish brown, aren't they?"

I couldn't remember exactly, but I knew they were a pretty normal colour.

"Oh yeah. Gran, could you bring out a map of Asahikawa? You bought a new one recently, right?"

"How do you know she's around the Nagayama area?"

"Her clothes had the name of the retirement home she stays at. We can tell how far she walked from there. It's not too far away." After she mentioned it, I remembered that.

I guess Yachi-san couldn't get around by bike like I could.

"That woman was walking with her back bent quite a bit. There's a lot of reasons why elderly people bend forward while they walk, like weakening muscles in the back, or spinal stenosis. One thing they have in common is that it's hard to walk long distances like that, and they often walk slowly. That can narrow down the range of our search."

Gran handed us a map of Asahikawa. It looked like it was brand new. Kujo-san brought it over to the dining table and spread the map out.

"Hmm, Nagayama… Right here." She said, pointing to the shrine. From there, she outlines a circle around it with her finger.

"Let's see…. In the area around her retirement home and apartment, there's two shrines other than the Nagayama shrine."

"So you think Yachi-san is at one of those?"

"I don't know. But it's worth a look, isn't it? She seemed like she was searching for something."

"Th… Thank you very much. I'll go look." I got up and thanked Kujo-san.

It's weird. I thought this person was a murderer, but then she went and helped me.

"Wait a second, I'll go too."

"Really?"

"You visited me because you were looking for her. Well, I guess it was only because you thought I killed her. In light of your courage, I'll help you out."

"B-but…"

I knew it would be helpful to have her there, but I still couldn't 100% trust that she isn't a murderer. She is the kind of person who collects bones, after all. I tried to politely tell her that I would be fine on my own, but she didn't listen.

"Let's get going, boy." Kujo-san said with a huge smile. Her smile was like a child looking at a toy.

Part four

Kujo-san seemed to have a good memory. She briskly walked toward the address of the nearby shrine I had written down without any hesitation. However, the torii at the small shrine were the same colour as at Nagayama shrine, and Yachi-san wasn't there. With Kujo-san walking and me pushing my bike, we headed toward the other shrine.

She wore a backpack over one shoulder, and was dressed in a white shirt and jeans. It made her look androgynous at first, but from the back, she looked very feminine. After taking a good look at her, I noticed that Kujo-san had a nice figure.

It was cloudy, but the temperature was comfortable. If I wasn't looking for Yachi-san and the person with me was Kujo-san, it would have been a pretty nice walk. However, unfortunately, Kujo-san wasn't so friendly as to engage in a conversation she wasn't interested in. At first I didn't want to walk in silence, so I tried to talk to her. When I didn't get any replies back, I decided to abandon the effort.

Walking in silence, we soon came to the second shrine. It was only about 15 minutes, but my back was starting to get sweaty. Surprisingly, the torii were silver at that shrine. The shrine was bigger than the first one, so we split up to look for Yachi-san. Unfortunately, I didn't find her. When I met back up with Kujo-san, she shook her head, telling me she didn't find Yachi-san either. I asked the receptionist at the shrine office if she'd seen Yachi-san, but she said she didn't remember.

"You haven't seen her?"

"That's right."

"I guess this… isn't the right shrine."

It seems we won't be able to find her so easily. Just then, I heard ambulance sirens in the distance, and instantly felt uneasy about if Yachi-san had been in an accident or something. For the time being, we decided to phone and ask if Yachi-san had been found yet. When I phoned my grandparents' house, nobody answered. I decided to phone my grandma's phone, and after it rang for a long time, she picked up. She said they still hadn't found her.

When I told her that I was searching, too, she told me not to follow strangers and to watch for cars, like I was a little kid. I didn't tell her that I was actually walking with a stranger. That definitely would have worried her. I looked over at the suspicious person who was looking at the torii.

"It's kind of weird… I thought all torii were red." I said. She crossed her arms and glanced at me, then looked back at the torii.

"The crimson is supposed to protect against evil spirits. The red paint to make this colour is made of mercury sulphide. I've heard that it prevents wood from rotting, so that's why they're always red."

"Protection from spirits… Doesn't that sound like the red chanchanko they give people on their 60th birthday?"

"That's right. There's different theories, but some people say it's supposed to represent going back to infancy. As you said, some say it's supposed to ward off evil spirits." She said so much in her explanation that it's like she's a different person from the woman who wouldn't say anything earlier. I was surprised she knew so much.

"Catholic cardinals also wear red robes. Since red is both the colour of blood and fire, it has a special meaning to humans." She said, walking a lap around the torii.

Sure it's nice, but I didn't think the torii were anything special. She was looking at them with so much enthusiasm. We came here to look for Yachi-san, so why is she staring at this?

"Hatsue Yachi-san… What colour were the torii she was looking for?"

"Yeah, I wonder." I added, not thinking much of it. "What is it?"

"Nothing. Do you think these torii look new? Maybe they repainted them recently, or built new ones."

"That's true…"

These shiny torii definitely didn't look old. They didn't seem to be damaged much by rain or wind.

"I noticed when I was walking around that the date they were built is written on them. Apparently they were built four years ago." She said. She started walking around again, carefully examining her surroundings.

“Kujo-san?”

“Sakurako is fine.”

“Huh? Ah, please wait!” I said back in a hurry.

I’ve never called an older woman by her first name like that. At most, I’ve called my cousin onee-chan. Ignoring my problems, Kujo-san - no, Sakurako-san - walked towards a man who appeared to work at the shrine. He was wearing a pale blue hakama sugata.

“Has this shrine been renovated or relocated? It’s just that the torii are new, and the main shrine is really nice.”

“Ah, yes. It was renovated four years ago. There was another shrine nearby that was dedicated to Kukuri-hime, then they moved it here, so they remodelled it.” The young man replied politely.

“Kukuri-hime?” I hadn’t heard of that god before.

“Yes. There used to be an old shrine called Shirayama Shrine nearby. It was really old, so nobody was maintaining it anymore.”

“...I see.” Sakurako-san listened with her arms crossed over her chest. When she heard the words “Shirayama Shrine,” she seemed to remember something.

“S-Sakurako-san?”

“Sorry, but can you tell me where the shrine was? What has it been replaced with?” Sakurako-san said, walking closer to the man.

He looked a bit surprised, but he still politely told us the location. It wasn’t far, it was near the Nagayama cemetery.

“W-what’s wrong?”

“This is the problem with having a new map. We have to hurry.”

“Do you think that’s the shrine she was looking for?”

“Yeah. I think I might know where she is.”

“Really?”

Sakurako-san thanked the man, then quickly started walking away. I took off the lock on my bike that I left beside the shrine and hurried after her. She could walk so fast.

“Um, I’ll carry your stuff!” I called out to her.

She put a fleece blanket and a drink in her bag in case we find Yachi-san. The distance we had to walk wasn’t easy.

“Are you trying to be a gentleman?” She laughed at my suggestion.

It’s not like I was trying to show off or anything - no, I just wanted to feel helpful.

“I’m not trying to be, I just thought I could put it on my bike.”

“It’s easier for someone to steal a bag if it’s on your bike.” She said bluntly.

“Then I’ll carry it on my back,” I said, and held out my hands. She smiled and handed me the backpack, then stretched.

There was something inside besides the sweater and plastic bottle. It was a little heavier than I expected.

The old Shirayama shrine was right next to where the Nagayama cemetery opened. The area was all fields and vast flat areas. My dad and grandma’s graves were there. I think they’re near the back. There’s a grave dedicated to the people who colonized this town. There were a few houses dotted around the fields near the cemetery.

There was an abrupt patch of overgrown plants around where the shrine was. Even at the entrance, a person could barely get through. I could hardly see my feet through the bamboo grass.

“Be careful that you don’t get scratched by the bamboo grass,” Sakurako-san said to me. She quickly and easily parted the plants to make a path.

“Is this really the place…?”

“I can’t guarantee it, but at the very least, someone was here before us.” Sakurako-san said, and pointed at some broken branches in front of her.

“Couldn’t it have been an animal?” Apparently my response was funny, somehow. Sakurako-san let out a shocking, malicious sounding laugh.

Walking through the parted grass path, we soon saw the rotting torii. It was black, the colour of rotten wood. Just beyond that was what appeared to be the main shrine, though it was heavily damaged. Surprisingly, there weren’t too many weeds growing from the stone around the building. I didn’t want to run into any snakes or bugs, so I was relieved.

“I guess there really was-“ I started to speak, but Sakurako-san pushed me out of the way and made her way up to the shrine.

I wasn’t expecting it, so I fell over. Before I could say something, I saw her kneeling under a tree.

“Boy, bring me water!”

“Huh…? O-okay!” As she spoke, I noticed a pair of feet wearing sandals next to her. I hurried over as fast as I could.

“And the blanket.”

I opened the backpack as I was told, and grabbed the blanket and water. Besides that, there was also an energy bar and a folding shovel. I handed the bottle to Sakurako-san. The person who collapsed under the tree was, without a doubt, Yachi-san. I couldn’t tell if she was sleeping or if she’d passed out. Her feet were covered in mud, and the only thing she was wearing were her pajamas.

Sakurako-san took Yachi-san’s pulse, checked her temperature, and washed her muddy hands. She seemed unusually used to it. Yachi-san’s fingernails were peeling, and covered in both mud and blood. It looked painful.

“Her temperature is a little low, but her pulse and breathing are stable. I’m not a doctor, so I can’t be sure, but I can tell that she has mild dehydration, and she’s starting to develop hypothermia. She looks like she’s just sleeping.” Sakurako-san said with relief, as she wrapped Yachi-san up in the blanket and lifted her upper body up. “It’s good that it wasn’t too cold today. This is all thanks to you. The police wouldn’t have searched here. Even if it was a warm day, the nights are cold. If she had been found even half a day later, it likely would have been too late.”

“But I didn’t do anything in particular…”

Rather, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that she found Yachi-san all on her own. It was like magic, or something out of a detective novel. She reminded me of a particular detective. Conan Doyle’s masterpiece. But no matter how good the detective is, how did everything go so well? I started to doubt her again. Could she have kidnapped Yachi-san, put her here, and then pretended to be the one who found her…?

“I hate troublesome things. I especially don’t like talking to the police. You can just say you found her.”

“Huh? But…”

Her disliking the police made her even more suspicious.

“You can just brag about how amazing you are or something, right? Just remember what you asked her before, and it’ll be fine, won’t it?”

“But…”

“Anyway, you better hurry and contact someone. Given her current condition, it could be dangerous if she doesn’t receive prompt treatment… well, I’ll leave the rest to you. If, by some chance, the police need to know something from me, gran will get angry, but my fiancé is a police officer, so I have some leeway. It’d be a little inconvenient, though.”

“Ah, Sakurako-san!”

Sakurako-san told me to make excuses like she was trying to force Yachi-san onto me, then quickly walked away. I wanted to chase after her, but I couldn’t just leave Yachi-san alone. I didn’t have a choice, so I called an ambulance, then my grandpa. Since I was with Sakurako-san, I couldn’t just say that I found her all by myself. I managed to lie and stay vague enough, but it made me feel guilty and frustrated.

Part 5

Every time I got praised for it, I felt guilty, like I was stealing all the credit. I received some sweets from the home, so I brought them over to Sakurako-san’s house. Of course I still harboured some distrust for her, but since she lived in such a big house with gran, and she apparently had a fiancé, I felt like she might not be so bad. But she didn’t want to get involved with the police, saying she’d get scolded by gran. I couldn’t understand what was going through her head at all.

I visited her house at around 10am. After I rang the doorbell, gran came out and smiled happily. I was worried about being a nuisance, but she welcomed me with open arms. I was planning on just greeting them and going home, but I ended up in the living room with a cup of tea. Apparently Sakurako-san was asleep. She stayed up until early in the morning working on a skeleton. I waited for her with my sweets and tea. If she was tired, I didn’t want to wake her up. It’s not like I had anywhere else to be… Besides, I’d rather thank her in person for all her help. I didn’t like waiting in a creepy living room, surrounded by bones on all sides.

The soybeans covered in lots of frosting just beg me to eat more of them. It had been a long time, so I couldn’t resist eating a bunch of them. After a while, Sakurako-san walked into the living room, looking sleepy.

“Oh… This is good.”

“Huh?”

“I was going to meet with you later.” She said after a big yawn. For some reason, her lack of modesty was kind of cute.

“Meet with me…?”

I told her my name, but she shouldn't have had my address or phone number. I tilted my head.

"It said your address on your bike."

"Oh."

Now that I thought about it, it really does. To prevent theft, my address and phone number were written on my bike with an oil based pen. It was already faded, so apparently she was looking for it.

"It's been dangerous lately. You should register your bike with the police rather than write your personal information in a visible spot… unfortunately, we don't live in a society where you're safe just because you're a boy."

"I see…"

I was surprised that she paid attention to something like that. Maybe I should have taken notes. She really seems to have a good memory.

"Um, for the time being, as thanks I…"

I didn't feel so great about her knowing my address. I felt anxiety rising up in my chest, then remembered the asahi beans I brought, and pointed at them. I decided to take my address off my bike later.

"Asahi beans, huh? Gran likes those." Sakurako-san smiled, telling me they're one of gran's favourite foods.

"You don't have to be so scared," Gran said, smiling.

Even though it was a thank you gift from the nursing home, gran told me I didn't have to bring it over. Well, I ate them too, so I couldn't really say thank you.

"Oh yeah, is the old woman from yesterday safe?"

"Yes. Since she got treated right away, there's no need to worry."

Just as Sakurako-san had said, Yachi-san had symptoms of mild dehydration and hypothermia. She woke up soon after, and I was told she's been doing well since. If she had been found much later, it could have turned out much worse.

"Yeah..."

"But you haven't fixed anything yet."

"Huh?"

"With the old woman. If we don't resolve her situation, the same thing will keep happening."

"Is there a way to resolve it?"

Sure, she had a point, but is there really any simple way to resolve this? To my surprise, Sakurako-san looked self satisfied.

"Well, young lady. You should eat first if you're going to go out, especially if you won't be back for a while. It's a little early, but would you like to join us for lunch?" Gran asked me while preparing tea for Sakurako-san.

"Well… What about going out?"

"Do you like fried shrimp?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I love it, but…"

"There's also an apple pie in the oven, so let's have that, too."

"Well…. Sure. Thanks."

The people who live in that house were really pushy about having things their way. It didn't matter if I tried to resist, I'd just end up going what gran told me to. I ended up needing to wait around half an hour before the food was ready.

During the wait, Sakurako-san told me about each and every one of the skeletons in the living room. The more she explained, the more I began to see how much she admired those bones. I didn't like how those bones reminded me of my grandma's death. Bones are death itself. Sakurako-san talked a lot more when it was something she was interested in. It didn't seem like she had many idle chats with gran. How does she stay sane in that quiet house, surrounded by the lifeless bodies of animals? I pretended to listen to that strange woman's enthusiastic explanations. On the outside she was beautiful, with a charming smile, but she was completely different on the inside.

After a while, gran returned with some delicious looking food. Some crispy fried shrimp, potato salad, konjac kinpira, and okra miso soup were placed in front of me. The rice had a distinct smell, like it was cooked in a clay bowl. The fried shrimp was nice and warm, the konjac kinpira smelled great, and the potato salad was delicious. There were roughly crushed up potatoes and boiled eggs, with some lumps left behind. A few pieces of pickles, onions, broccoli, and bacon were mixed in, too. The paprika powder that was sprinkled on top added some nice colour, too. It was completely different from my mom's potato salad, this was potato salad fit for kings. There was lots of it, too. And it was still warm. The bacon must have been fresh cooked, and only mixed in right before it was served. It was so superb that I almost forgot to keep eating.

"You sure can eat." Sakurako-san said, sounding sort of amazed. "You're a real glutton, aren't you?"

"Y-you think so? Sorry…"

It was so good that I forgot to show any restraint. I was embarrassed, so I put my chopsticks down.

"No, no, it makes gran happy to see a growing boy eat so much of her cooking."

Gran laughed a bit and brought me another helping. As if there weren't already enough side dishes, she brought some simmered salmon and homemade salmon roe, too.

"The young lady always either loves or hates food. It was hard to raise her properly like that."

Unlike me, Sakurako-san had already finished eating. Well, she is rather slender, so I can see how gran had a hard time.

"Gran, that's enough." Sakurako-san said with a disappointed expression.

She seemed like she was in a bad mood, but as soon as gran brought out the fresh apple pie, she lit up. She must really like sweet things. Once I got my piece of pie, I understood while she smiled so wide. The texture and flavour were both so good that I couldn't stop eating, even after I was already full.

"Well, we should get going now," Sakurako-san said, after drinking some tea.

"B-but where are we going, exactly?"

"She kept digging at the bottom of that tree, even after her fingernails started separating. Don't you think that's strange?"

"Well…"

It definitely was surprising. If she was digging under the cherry tree in the garden at her retirement home, especially until her hands ended up like that… It definitely wasn't normal.

"The tree from yesterday… Do you know what kind it was?"

"Probably a Sargent cherry tree."

"Cherry tree…" Cherry blossoms again. "At the nursing home, she was digging under the cherry blossom trees in the garden."

"Even after she escaped the home, something was binding her heart to what's under the cherry blossoms. I think it's buried there."

"Where?"

"Probably- Ah, there's 2 or 3 things I'd like to confirm before I say, still." Sakurako-san stood up, and said she's going to get ready to leave.

Part 6

The direction we headed in was different from the day before. It was a bit colder than the day before, so it was chilly without a sweater in the morning. By the time we'd had lunch, it was good weather for going on a walk. Unlike the day before, the sky was blue. I could see the daisetsuzan mountain range in the distance. I put Sakurako-san's backpack over my shoulder, and walked behind her. I tried to ask where we're going, but she wouldn't tell me.

I was wondering why Sakurako-san was going past the ruins of the shrine. Soon, she stopped in front of a house. It was a big house in a vast field. Along the road we passed a house that was having repairs done on the roof, and an old tractor with dirty tires. There was a greenhouse with some plants that were growing before the last harvest. It seems it wasn't for growing grains, but for vegetables instead. Although having a large kitchen garden isn't rare in Asahikawa, having one on his scale must mean they're into agriculture. The bright green spinach was waving in the wind.

"Noto, huh? Figures." Sakurako-san read the nameplate, snorted, and entered without permission.

"What do you mean 'figures'?"

"In the Ishikawa prefecture, a lot of surnames start with 'No'."

"...Ishikawa?" I stared blankly.

"'谷内' being read as 'Yachi' is also common in the Ishikawa prefecture."

"I see… but why are you talking about Ishikawa right now?"

I knew Sakurako-san knew all kinds of things, but I was still confused about how the topic of Ishikawa came up.

"In Ishikawa, there's a sacred mountain range called Shirayama, where a shrine dedicated to Kukuri-him is. It's also called the Shirayama-hime-no-kami. Yomotsuhirasaka and Isanagi-no-Mikoto are worshipped there, too. It's said that it connects the worlds of the living and dead."

"The living and the dead?"

“The settlers who first started living in Hokkaido came from Aomori, Akita, and Niigata, but many also came from Ishikawa. This is just my guess, but I think a lot of the settlers from Ishikawa lived in this area.”

“Oh…”

I finally understood what she was trying to say. I remembered seeing a big tombstone dedicated to the settlers in the Nagayama cemetery. I noticed that the farmer we passed was looking at us suspiciously, probably because of our conversation.

“Do you have some business here?” An old lady who was doing farm work called out to us.

“We don’t need anything. If I may ask, do you know if a woman named Hatsue Yachi used to live here before?” Sakurako-san replied.

The old woman still looked suspicious, but said, “I remember Hatsu-chan.”

“That’s great. Can you tell us what you know about her?”

I’m sure suddenly being visited by a young woman she’d never met was confusing for the woman.

She mumbled, “Hatsu-chan, huh…” with a lonely expression on her face. “...Hatsu-chan used to live right next to a small shrine called Shirayama shrine.”

“Next to the shrine?”

I looked at Sakurako-san, and she glanced back at me. She nodded to me.

“The Yachi family… There were a few kids, with Hatsu-chan being the oldest. She took care of her younger siblings in place of her mother. I’d often see them playing near the shrine.”

“Umm… Could you tell us more about her? Yachi-san, I mean.” I asked. The old woman looked at me suspiciously again. I told her about house Yachi-san keeps escaping her nursing home to look for a shrine somewhere, so she seemed at least a little convinced that we weren’t doing anything bad. “That’s why we were hoping we could hear a little bit about Yachi-san…”

“I don’t really know much about her, though,” the old woman said, and invited us to sit on a shaded bench in her garden. “Hatsu-chan didn’t go to school, but since we were both busy with our families and chores, we didn’t really hang out together or anything.”

The woman prepared some barely tea, and began her story.

“Her father was a carpenter, and very good at his job, however he had a horrible drinking habit. Most of their income went to paying for more alcohol. Since she had a lot of siblings, life wasn’t easy. She would often take care of her younger siblings, help out in my field, and bring home vegetables.”

“She had a lot of siblings?”

“Well, it was the same when I was a kid. For me, I have 4 older siblings and 2 younger siblings. Back then, things weren’t as convenient, so not everyone made it to adulthood.” The old woman laughed. It’s true that all of my grandparents have a lot of siblings.

“But… even so, Hatsu-chan had a lot of siblings. Even though it was tough when her dad was around, things didn’t seem so bad.”

“Her father… is he dead?”

“No… It was a while ago, but I heard he’s working at a restaurant under the overpass, going after younger women**.** He finally decided to abandon his family, but once the person who was bringing in most of the money left, Hatsu-chan had a really hard time.” She spat out,

sounding disgusted. “I don’t think they were very well nourished, either. The year her father left, her siblings died of typhoid fever. Her mother, too.”

“No way…”

“In the end, they lost their house, and all the remaining siblings got separated… I don’t know what happened to Hatsue-chan. That’s all I know. I heard that the sisters who had useful skills were sold…” The woman said that even though it was several decades ago, talking about it still makes her chest hurt.

Although she was losing her memory, her body was healthy. Even if only a little, I wanted to help ease her pain.

“That must have been really hard…” The old woman said.

She must have understood better than anyone, since she was around at the same time. The woman mumbled something, so I kept quiet.

“...”

After a bit of silence, the old woman looked like she wanted to say something.

“If you know anything else, please tell me.” Sakurako-san said bluntly, after noticing that the woman was fidgeting.

“...There were nasty rumours about Hatsu-chan’s family.”

“Rumours?”

“Ah… One year, the mom got pregnant, but since she wasn’t able to raise another child, she gave it up for adoption right after it was born.” The woman said, dropping her gaze. “But… There were rumours that rather than giving the child up for adoption, she actually killed the baby… Or something like that. Nobody bought that house for a long time.”

“Is… Is that true?!”

“Of course not. Even when they destroyed the house, they couldn’t find any bones from the child. Besides that… Hatsu-chan would never forgive her for doing that, since she loved her siblings so much.” After saying that, the old woman got up. Apparently she didn’t want to talk anymore.

She turned her back to us and slowly made her way back to the field, but then she stopped. She looked back at us, and asked us where to find the home that Yachi-san was staying at.

“I don’t have anything in particular I want to say, and she’s probably forgotten about me, but…” she said, with a lonely smile. “Hatsu-chan was always kind and beautiful, just like her mom.” After looking over the fields again, she turned to look at the shrine. “When I was a kid, I always admired her.”

I felt like I could see a bit of Yachi-san in her, seeing her like that. After leaving the Noto house, we headed straight for the shrine.

“Sakurako-san?”

“What?”

“Could it be… that you think the baby’s bones are buried there?”

“Well, we’ll find out once we dig.”

“Dig…”

The bones weren’t found at Yachi-san’s house. In that case, they might have been buried at the shrine next door.

“That’s right… The god of that shrine was related to the world of the dead.”

“In the first place, it differs by region, but children under the age of seven are often buried differently than adults since they aren’t considered people.”

“Even so…”

It still isn’t normal to bury a child on the grounds of a shrine. I had an intense uncomfortable, wicked feeling, but I couldn’t help but follow Sakurako-san. It was much easier to walk to the shrine since the paramedics went through yesterday. Sakurako-san pulled a folding shovel out of the backpack, and started digging without any hesitation.

“H-hold up… we should ask the police first!”

“They’ll take too long, it’s fine as long as we report what we dig up.”

“T… That’s…”

What’s with her? Even though she hardly spent any time preparing, and she knew there could be a human corpse buried there, she really didn’t hesitate at all before digging. As I thought, that person really wasn’t normal. The quiet crunching sound rhythmically repeated. I hugged my knees and kept my gaze down, waiting for the time to pass. I thought about running away, but since she hated the police so much, I was worried she wouldn’t actually report the tiny bones properly. While my legs screamed at me to run, I managed to stay there. Soon, a hard sound caused a wave of dread to wash over me.

“Ugh….”

“Boy, grab the small shovel out of the bag.”

“I-is it…?” Even though my hands were trembling, I did as I was told.

“I don’t know, but something big is buried here.”

“Something big?”

“It doesn’t seem like they’re a child’s bones, at least. The bones would have already decomposed. The bones of children have more cartilage, and they don’t seem to have such a defined shape.”

Could it have been a rock then…? While I passed the shovel to Sakurako-san, I peeked into the hole. It was about a metre deep. From the sunlight that managed to get through the trees, I could see an old, worn out piece of fabric.

“Huh…?”

I had a bad feeling. Sakurako-san returned to her digging for about 10 more minutes. Eventually, she wiped the sweat off her forehead and took out a pair of gloves from her pocket.

“S… Sakurako-san?”

“Boy, sorry to ask but could you help me take this out?” She said with a nonchalant expression.

“No way!”

“But it doesn’t look like a child’s skeleton.”

“Really?”

I didn’t want to even imagine what I’d do if a child’s skeleton was in that cloth. But apparently it wasn’t a child at all. I decided to give up on fighting it and help.

“It’s amazing. It’s in beautiful condition.” Sakurako-san said happily, holding one of the bones towards me.

“E-eek!”

It wasn't a prank. It wasn't a fake, or a deer like the corpse in her backyard. It was a genuine human bone. I was shocked. I couldn't contain my disgust and fear, I wanted to run away.

"Don't worry, it's already completely decomposed."

What? What was that supposed to mean? A skeleton still means a corpse. I couldn't stop trembling.

"Hmm, it was probably a man."

I backed up a bit. Sakurako-san glanced at me for a moment before looking back at the bones.

"Wh-why? How do you know that?" I asked, teary eyed. I grabbed a bottle of mineral water out of the backpack.

"The skull can tell you a lot. The frontal bone and lower jaw, and also the pelvis in particular. By examining those parts, you can roughly determine the gender and age of the skeleton." She looked satisfied with her explanation, then continued digging for bones in the hole.

Seeing the big earthworms and centipedes wriggling in there, along with listening to what she was saying only added to my nausea.

"Look at the palate. The incisor suture is supposed to be relatively reliable when determining the age. It begins to fade in one's 20s, and by the time you're 50 it'll completely disappear. In this case, it's thin, but still there. Since the inner part is starting to disappear, I'd say he was over 30."

So we knew he was over 30, but under 50.

"Also, I can see some dotted indentation on the incisor teeth. We can probably assume this skeleton is from a male, aged 30-40." Sakurako-san continued her explanation.

Honestly, I didn't care. She looked so happy, it made me worried that she was some kind of serial killer, but her seriousness was more like a doctor or researcher talking about her work.

"Bones change with age. The sutures on the skull can also help determine the age. Since people have individual differences, it's best to look at all parts of the skeleton before making any assumptions.

She mentioned "sutures on the skull," but I didn't even know what that meant. She was pointing at a line on the skull when she said that, so I figured it was probably that.

"Let's see… He was probably right handed, and as a job… Maybe a carpenter."

"Huh?" She can tell that much from just a bone?! "Really?!" I asked her in surprise.

"The more muscle you have, the thicker and stronger your bones become. If you look at the difference between the right and left hand, you can tell which one had more muscle. Besides that, the right elbow joint is deformed. He probably had cubital tunnel syndrome in his right arm. It causes numbness, and it's common in carpenters and people who make tatami mats."

"An occupational disorder of a carpenter…"

Once again, I was surprised by the woman looking at bones in front of me. At the same time, something like respect slowly started to well up deep in my heart. She had an exceptional memory, and extensive knowledge. The only thing she couldn't find was a name. With nothing but bones from a corpse, she could tell not only the gender and age, but also his dominant hand and occupation.

“The thyroid cartilage is broken, and there’s several depressed fractures in the skull… I don’t think he died of natural causes. I can’t judge his direct cause of death. There’s no doubt he was strangled and hit with a blunt object, though.”

“Then… that means this person was probably…”

An adult male, around 30-40 years old, worked as a carpenter… hearing all that, I started to feel like I was gradually seeing the answer. Moreover, there’s signs it was a murder…?!

“Perhaps this is what Hatsue Yachi was looking for.”

Sakurako-san called him “this” as if he’s an object. She should have said “this person”. Even if it was just with her fingernails, Yachi-san still tried her best to find him.

“Are you going to report it? If not, I’ll take it home with me.”

I was dumbfounded by Sakurako-san’s mischievous smile, as if she were picking up a toy.

Part 7

A while later, the DNA analyses determined that the remains from the shrine belonged to Yachi-san’s father. Sakurako-san told me that the Asahikawa Medical University has the best DNA testing technology in Hokkaido. Since it had been several decades since the body was buried, and Yachi-san’s actions were unclear, nobody was charged. Actually, there was no evidence that Yachi-san killed her father. Sakurako-san said that bones can tell us a lot, but it’s always just one side of the story. They can’t answer all our questions so conveniently.

A little while after, Sakurako-san and I visited Yachi-san together. Yachi-san’s nurse was really grateful to me. Sakurako-san seemed a little awkward. This time, too, I ended up getting all the credit. Fortunately, Sakurako-san didn’t seem to care.

“How is Yachi-san doing?”

“Well, to be honest… Nothing has really changed. Her memory seems to be more vague… She seems to remember things from a long time ago, but can’t remember things that happened recently.”

When the police visited, they didn’t have much to say. When we visited her hospital room, she was laying down in her bed, watching TV. She didn’t seem to remember me. When I explained that I was the grandson of her neighbours, she said, “oh, you’re here.” She handed me two jellies from the fridge, saying, “it’s hot out today, enjoy these.” Feeling her warm hand somehow made me feel like I was going to tear up. Why do people have to get old?

“You seem to be doing well, your complexion looks good.” Sakurako-san said gently. Her voice was soft.

Harada-san seemed worried at first, but eventually she had to get back to work and left. Sakurako-san pulled the chair up next to the bed and sat down.

“Hatsue-san. I have something to tell you today. A skeleton was found buried under the cherry tree at the Shirayama temple.”

Yachi-san didn't look like she understood that we found the bones of her father. Still, Sakurako-san leaned close to her ear and whispered to her, holding her hand.

"We found what you were searching for. You don't need to worry… He's been given a proper burial." Sakurako-san calmly whispered. She spoke slowly, and quietly. Rather than telling us if she understood or not, she held onto Sakurako-san's hand.

"...You buried him?" Yachi-san asked Sakurako-san. She stared, motionless, for a while.

Eventually, Sakurako-san opened up the drawer on the bedside table. Inside, there was a white cardigan. It wasn't Yachi-san's, but something Sakurako-san gave her. Yachi-san handed her the cardigan, then pointed to the tattered notebook that was under it. When I took out the notebook, an old photo fell out. It was tattered, and the colour had faded. It looked like a family photo, but I couldn't make out any details. There were many children.

"...Mom couldn't do anything, she was so scared" When I handed it to her, she lovingly stroked the children in the photo with her fingers. I guess that's why the picture faded.

"So, did you bury him instead?" Sakurako-san calmly asked again.

"...I have big brothers and sisters."

"Did they kill him?"

As she spoke, light returned to Yachi-san's eyes. It seemed her memory was returning.

"Dad, mom…"

"What happened to your mother?"

She didn't answer that question. Yachi-san silently, motionlessly stared at a point on the white wall. After thinking for a while, she muttered, "it was the night after the first snowfall. It was cold, and we had no work, so dad was drunk all day. My mom had just had a baby and wasn't doing well, so all she did was sleep. My sisters and I were taking care of everyone."

Bit by bit, she continued her story between pauses. Her tone sounded more like a young girl than an elderly woman.

"Dad had a reputation for his quality work, and we were proud, too. When he wasn't drunk, he was a kind, warm-hearted, caring person. Sometimes he would get tricked by bad people, which hurts our family's finances." Yachi-san laughed a bit, but then her expression clouded. "...But when he got drunk, he changed completely. He did terrible things, like hitting my mom. At night, I could always hear my mom crying. That day as well, my dad got drunk and hit my mom. Again and again. My mom went limp, we were scared, and the younger children started crying."

Yachi-san's breath gradually became shallower and shorter. Sakurako-san gently stroked her back.

"My mom's nose and mouth were bleeding, but my dad didn't stop hitting her. I thought my mom was going to die if I didn't do anything… so I..." Yachi-san's breathing kept getting rougher. "Mom was begging for help, reaching her bloodied hand towards me…"

"L-let's stop, Sakurako-san!"

Yachi-san was clearly getting too emotional. It was starting to scare me, but Sakurako-san put her palm in front of me to stop me.

"I couldn't just pretend I didn't see anything. The bigger kids tried to help… I didn't even know what happened. The next thing I knew, my dad was motionless on the ground."

"...Was your mother okay?"

She nodded. She wiped her tears with a tissue that Sakurako-san gave her.

“...I told my mom that my dad had left. Everyone seemed to believe it… I couldn’t rest easy, so I left the town.”

Then that brought us to what we’d heard. Noto-san seemed to believe it.

“At night, when it was pitch black outside, I went to the shrine to bury my dad with the other bigger kids. Nobody would dig there, so my dad could rest in peace. It was like the jizokko were watching us.”

“...Jizokko?” I asked timidly.

“When a mom had a baby that died soon after it was born, she buried it at the shrine. The Jizokko are gods for those moms. They give the baby back to the gods.” Yachi-san said.

I looked it up later and learned that Jizokko are common in shrines in Niigata and Ishikawa.

“But, my parents might have killed the baby by blocking its mouth while it was asleep. It was winter, so we didn’t have enough to eat, and the smaller children were always hungry.” She said, tears dripping from her eyes. “I knew… But I couldn’t tell anyone…”

“You don’t need to worry. All your memories are buried away in the ground. All the animals in the dirt are going to eat away at your past.” Sakurako-san said, gently patting Yachi-san’s back. “So don’t go trying to dig it back up anymore. Just forget about all of it. Crimes eventually return to the earth, just like flesh and blood do.”

Part 8

Yachi-san’s blood pressure went up too high, so we got driven out of the home.

“...I wonder why Hatsue-san wanted to dig up her dad”

If she dug him up, her crime would come to light. Isn’t that something you would want to take to the grave?

“Actually, we don’t know if she was involved in the actual murder. Her memory was kind of hazy… Even if her crime was revealed, she couldn’t just leave it as it was. She’s the only one who knew her dad was resting there.”

If she hadn’t tried to find it, that body may have gone undiscovered. Perhaps it was more frightening to think of him being left alone and forgotten than to be arrested.

“People become bones,” Sakurako-san said. “In the end, when they become bones, they return to those who were left behind. My uncle, who is a forensic pathology professor, once said that the truth is like bones. She tried to reveal the truth behind her father's bones before there wasn’t any family left for them to return to.”

“Become bones… return…”

Slowly, a warm feeling spread through my chest. I couldn’t contain myself, so I asked Sakurako-san to head to Nagayama cemetery. On the way, I saw a small flower that looked like a sunflower, and picked it. Unlike a sunflower, that one looked straight up at the sky.

“It’s a coneflower.”

“Coneflower?”

“It’s written as ‘grass that warps the soul’. It’s declared a non-native species in the alien species act… but you can have the amount needed to decorate a cemetery.” Sakurako-san said.

Somehow, it felt fitting for those flowers to be blooming near a cemetery. I placed the yellow flower on my grandma’s grave. Sakurako-san let out a bored yawn, and went off somewhere. I poked the reflective water in the rice paddy next door with my toes, and played with a tree frog.

“So, was it fun?” Sakurako-san said as I lifted my head.

“What?”

“Doing something different from usual.”

“...What do you mean?”

Why did she ask me that- actually, how did she know? I stared at her. She shrugged, like she didn’t know what I was confused about.

“You always walked down the same road.”

“...You saw me?”

”You were looking at me, after all. If you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes back.”

Apparently it was obvious. Sakurako-san grinned and looked up.

“Everything in this world looks grey, and it feels like time has stopped. I feel that too, sometimes. But you have to remember that time never stops. You have to keep moving with its flow, otherwise you’ll just return to the soil, like a dead man.”

“Move with its flow?”

I felt a prickling pain in my chest. Thoughts of my Yachi-san, and my late grandmother crossed through my mind.

“That’s right. Whether you want it or not, time never stops. But if you look at it a different way, that means there’s nothing more interesting than the world. Don’t be pessimistic. You haven’t turned to dust yet. Your skin, muscles, and bones are all supporting you.” Sakurako-san said, extending both her hands into the air.

Her dark hair and white shirt blowing in the wind, under the blue sky. Her smile was full of joy. Before I even realized, I was smiling, too.

After I parted ways with Sakurako-san, I went back to my grandpa’s house another day to set up an internet connection for him. My grandpa had left for the dojo, so my grandma watched me. Having her watch me set up the computer made me kind of uncomfortable. I just wanted to finish quickly and hurry home… But then my grandpa asked me to stay for dinner.

“I’ll make you anything you like. What do you feel like having?”

“Do I have to pick? Everything you make is delicious.”

She tilted her head while she thought, then said, “how about fried cutlets, then? Oh, and maybe fried shrimp. Shou-chan, you like fried salmon, right? We got some salmon from your other grandpa, so let’s fry that, too.”

“I don’t think I could eat that much. Besides, that’s a lot to make.” I forced a smile. My grandma didn’t smile back. She stared back at me with a serious, or maybe even angry, expression.

“I’ll make whatever you want to eat today… But, please stop doing strange things. You were a huge help with Yachi-san, but… They found a corpse, and that just isn’t right.”

“What? But that…”

It’s not like it was me who found the corpse… but that didn’t matter to her. She hugged me tight.

“If something happened to you, you wouldn’t be able to visit us anymore.”

“...Huh?”

“Shou-chan, I think of you as my own precious grandchild, even if you aren’t actually. If your mom didn’t let you visit us anymore, I wouldn’t be able to be your grandma anymore.”

“Grandma…”

I always felt like there was some kind of distance between us. Ever since I was little, she would tell me time and time again that it’s dangerous to play outside, and to be careful of cars and make sure not to get lost. I always thought she was being strict.

‘What would I do if you got hurt?!’ She would always get mad at me like that. I finally understood what she meant. It’s what she didn’t say… When I put my hand on her back, I could feel her crying. She was smaller than me now. I finally understood why she was so worried.

“...I’m sorry, grandma. I’ll make sure I’m careful.”

She was crying. In contrast to my grandpa, who was always calm and tough but cried when he got drunk, I’d never seen my grandma cry in front of someone else before.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, grandma. I’d hate it if I couldn’t see you anymore. I absolutely wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

Tears started to fill my eyes, too. I’m truly sorry, grandma. Important people in our lives don’t always stay around forever. Time always keeps moving. I won’t have much time left to be with my grandma anymore. I had to cherish her more. Still, deep down, I felt that the extraordinary time I spent with Sakurako-san was fun. Even though I saw a corpse, I had no regrets. Maybe I’ll continue to walk down that road that’s covered in old trees.

My hunch was correct. Since then, Sakurako-san contacted me from time to time. We went and ate that sweet shrimp in Mashike, and found a skull. I thought of her as a friend who was older than me, but I wondered if she thought of me as a student or something. In that quiet house without many visitors, even Sakurako-san and gran would be bored. The Kujou family brought a gust of excitement to my life.

“But really… you’re wrong.”

Alone, I take a sip of cold milk, and sighed. That’s right, it’s not like that. I realized that when I went to Sapporo today. It’s a secret from Sakurako-san. I emailed Ariwara-san and let him know, and after hesitating a bit, he told me the hospital where Sakurako-san’s uncle is staying. A sudden visit would have annoyed him. I was really nervous until he welcomed me - through a speech aid, of course. All this time I’ve been wondering about the name “Soutarou” so I can’t help but ask about it first.

“Who is Soutarou? What’s their relationship with Sakurako-san?” Nobody will answer those questions. Not even Sakurako-san. Of course, her uncle may not talk about it, either. However, Shitara-ojisan seems to know that I came here, resolved to ask about that one thing.

Her younger brother. If he were alive, he would be 20 this year. He died in a sudden accident when Sakurako-san was about 12 years old. He hesitated before telling me all that. I feel like so many things were cleared up all at once. That’s why Sakurako-san and gran were surprised when I told them my name. Shoutarou and Soutarou. I’m also surprised by how similar our names are.

That’s why I had to blow out those 20 candles, and why everyone seemed to be strangely friendly towards me. That’s why Ariwara-san gave me a birthday present addressed to someone else, and why Shouko-san’s grandma smiled when she saw me and told me about how big I’ve gotten. Most importantly, that’s why Sakurako-san accepted me. I was just a replacement this whole time. For the Kujo family and everyone related to them, it was like their younger brother came back.

According to Shitara-ojisan, I resemble Soutarou-kun. Apparently my face is similar in some ways. He said that if he’d gotten the chance to grow up, he probably would have been like I am. He probably would have shared my love for food. His favourite foods were gran’s fried shrimp and apple pie. He liked food with apples in it the most. Even though he was still just a kid, and it’s been all these years, he must have been truly loved for his family to remember him like that. Sakurako-san must have been hit the hardest, since she was left all alone after he died.

I… thought something was strange this whole time, but now I know the truth. This… This whole time, and from now on, I’ll only ever be a “replacement” to them. I won’t really be “me”.

“...”

I’m so upset that I felt like crying. I decide to drop by a tea shop instead of going home. If I went home, or if I was with Utsumi-san or Isozaki-sensei, I probably would have just ended up bawling my eyes out. Rather than being frustrated, I’m just sad. I feel like such an idiot.

I scoop up some of my chiffon cake and ice cream, even though it already melted. It’s cold and sweet. My hot milk has gotten cold, so I order some tea. I think it’s both a good and a bad thing that you can’t drink this tea right away. I put the quilt cover over the pot and wait. Spending time leisurely like this reminds me of spending time at Sakurako-san’s house. I always think that when I have tea. When I come here with Kougami, I miss out on this nice quiet time. Since I’m alone today, I spend too much time sitting around.

The tea looks darker than usual. I take my first sip without milk… It’s hot and bitter. I’m not good with bitter things. I can’t drink coffee without milk and sugar. The components that give coffee its scent are also present in the scent of a rotting corpse. How can adults drink something like that so easily? Do they really think something so bitter is tasty? Am I going to think the same thing when I’m older, or is it something I’ll have to pretend to like? Maybe if I’m patient, I’ll be able to enjoy it one day. I might, even if it seems weird.

“...”

Suddenly, my phone vibrates. I got an email. I pick up my phone to check it. It’s from my mom.

“What time will you be home? What about dinner?”

I was supposed to be hanging out with Imai and some other friends. After a while, I decide to head home. I get another email, this time in a different folder. The one where my conversations with Phantom are stored. Even if she won't see me in person, we can still communicate like this. It's a secret from my mom and everyone. I'm pretending like I don't know who Phantom really is. If I don't, I'm sure she'll go away again. I would absolutely hate that.

I miss the Kujou family. I love gran's soft voice, and Hector's fluffy hair and breath. As it is, I don't think I could bear being so distant from the Kujou family Sakurako-san and the others have become extremely important to me. I want to mean more to Sakurako-san than just a replacement for her brother. At the very least, I'm not Soutarou-kun.

-'What's wrong with being a replacement?' An unexpected voice whispers inside my head. What's wrong with being a replacement for Soutarou-kun? After all, she needs me. It's as if Soutarou-kun hadn't turned into bones. I'm alive. Even if I have to live in his shadow. Still, I'm here.

People can't live without relying on anyone. When something painful happens, people can't get their footing back without someone to hold onto. They can't live without that person. I think that must be how Sakurako-san is feeling. And me, as well.

In my third year of middle school, I couldn't escape the overwhelming sense of loss I felt. It was Sakurako-san who rescued me from my whirlpool of anxiety, helplessness, loneliness, and unhappiness. If I hadn't met Sakurako-san, I would never have gotten to know Kougami, Utsumi-san, or Shouko-san. Death is always beside people. That's why you can't live a life you'll regret. Don't make those you leave behind sad. She taught me about that.

I finish drinking my tea. It's bitter, and doesn't taste very good, but I drink it anyway. While I'm not happy about it, at least I've grown up enough to swallow it, even if I think it's ridiculous.

I haven't spoken face to face with Sakurako-san since she visited me in the hospital. I'm sure she won't meet with me as things are. She's always been afraid of me getting hurt. That's why I have to go see her. I don't want to talk to Phantom, I want to talk to Sakurako Kujo.

Tomorrow is Monday. It might be a little late, but I'll head to her house after school. That's what I promise myself as I get up from my seat. I can't hesitate. I feel guilty for lying to my mom, but there's things I just can't give up on.

"Um, thank you for… the chiffon cake."

"No problem. Weren't you hospitalized for an injury? Are you okay?"

I look to see who's talking to me. It's a woman who sometimes listens to me. I tell her that I'm fine. I'm surprised by how many people worried about me when I was in the hospital.

I guess people can't live on their own, after all. I think back to what Shitara-ojisan said. You don't have just one bone. People can only survive if they have a bunch of bones supporting them. Sakurako-san said her uncle was her atlas. I want to be a bone that supports her, too.

After I pay, the woman hands me a bag of homemade chocolate cookies. The owner of the shop calls out to me, saying, "oh, that's right. Here."

"What is it?" I stop and turn to look. He hands me a letter.

"A customer came by saying they wanted this letter given to Kujo-san. Could I ask you to deliver it? It's no hurry, so you can do it anytime."

"It's for Sakurako-san?"

I take a look, and sure enough, it says “to Sakurako Kujo” on it. It doesn’t have the name of the sender. I think about checking inside, but if they know that she frequents this shop, they’re probably an acquaintance of her’s. I take the letter. Well, it was good timing, at least. Actually, it’s a good reason for me to visit her.

“Alright. I’ll take it to her tomorrow.”

When I leave the store, it’s cold enough for me to see my breath. The frozen air sparkles in the sunlight. It’s like diamond dust. The temperature is probably around -10 degrees. It’s a really cold day. At least the wind seems to have died down. I can see stars in the sky. It’s a winter constellation. Today, even the sharp cold doesn’t feel like it bothers me as I head home.

Intermission

The pure white snow reminds me of Sakurako-san. Cold, silky, at the threat of melting at a moment's notice. It's constantly in danger. Sakurako-san gives the feeling like she lives in a sanctuary, unaffected by anything. I think about that while I head to Sakurako-san's house after school. It's about 200 metres from Nagayama shrine to her house, but the snow is blowing fiercely. I listen to the crunching sound of the snow under my feet as I walk onward.

I've been feeling very lonely since I've been locked out of her sanctuary. I'm only half convinced I'll be able to return to her side again. I'm in Soutarou-kun's shadow, unable to see. Should I accept defeat and stay in his shadow? Am I a coward? I don't want to just obediently keep being a "substitute" for someone else, but at the same time, it's my only weapon.

I prepare for the worst, and look down as I walk. Before long, I arrive at the Kujou residence. It feels like it's been such a long time. As I expected, the house is completely buried under the snow. After greeting them, I'll head out to shovel.

Before I even press the buzzer, I hear Hector's footsteps and barking coming closer on the other side. Dogs are amazing. I smile wryly, and push the buzzer. The door opens immediately.

"Young master!"

"Oh, woah—" As soon as gran greets me, surprised, a white fur ball charges at me.

"Hey, Hector!"

Hector doesn't seem to hear gran scolding him. He's gone past a normal barking sound, and is now making a strange, joyful "aruru" noise. His tail is wagging so hard it looks like it's going to come off, and he pushes against me with his whole body.

"I know how you feel, Hector, but calm down a little."

Hector turns around, panting. When I crouch down, he starts licking my face. In the cold air, Hector's smelly dog breath makes my face feel itchy.

"Hector, down."

A cold voice suddenly says. Hector lays down at my feet. Although the upper half of his body obeyed, it seems like his lower half couldn't. Hector lets out a dissatisfied grumble as he lowers his upper body.

"He hasn't been getting walked enough recently, so he has a lot of energy. There's going to be work done on the flooring soon, so he can't run around in the house until that's done. He's going to have a hernia at this rate," Sakurako-san says calmly, stroking Hector's head. However, Hector doesn't understand, so he lets out a pitiful howl. Sakurako-san invites me to sit by the entrance.

I sit down on the front steps, and Hector sits in front of me. He smiles, practically begging me to pet him. He's just as soft and fluffy as always.

"You… Aren't supposed to come here," Sakurako-san suddenly says, after silently watching me play with Hector for a while.

"Don't you know? When you tell someone not to do something, they have the urge to rebel against you," I reply with a grin. She looked troubled.

“...But I don’t want to take you away from your mother. So, you absolutely must not come here again.”

“I’m old enough that I can make decisions for myself. I can at least decide on my own friends,” I answer confidently, but she shakes her head.

“I want to sever all ties with you not for your sake, but for your mother’s. Don’t misunderstand me. Your will has nothing to do with this.” Sakurako-san’s voice is stiff and stern. She’s pushing me away as hard as she can.

“But!”

Gran taps my arm. I didn’t even realize she was making tea. She places the tray down and says, “calm down, both of you.”

I can’t just stop what I’m feeling, but I don’t want to disobey gran. I fix the collar of my coat to hide my irritation. I hear a rustling sound from my pocket.

“...Oh yeah. The owner of the tea shop asked me to give this to you.”

It’s a truce for now. I hold the letter out to Sakurako-san.”

“A letter?”

I can’t hide my disappointment as Sakurako-san opens the seal with a puzzled expression. She must be happy to receive it. At least she hasn’t changed at all compared to our emails. Or maybe she’s trying to act reserved, to pretend like she’s keeping a distance between us? It’s a secret relationship kept from those around us. Staring at Sakurako-san while thinking about that, her face suddenly stiffens.

“Diaethria**…**?”

She says it like it’s a spell. Diaethria, huh...? What the hell is that?

“Um… Sakurako-san?”

“...Who gave this to you?” Sakurako-san asks, putting her fingers on her temple as if she has a headache.

“Huh? Ah, the owner of the tea shop. He said someone wanted to give it to you.”

“To me?”

“Yeah. I didn’t ask what kind of person it was, but… was it a bad letter?”

I feel guilty watching Sakurako-san’s expression stiffen. Maybe it was a bad prank, or a letter that shouldn’t have been delivered.

“Umm…”

“That’s right. To be honest, it wasn’t pleasing.”

“I’m… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault. But… the situation seems to have changed a little.”

“Did something happen?”

“No… let’s see. For now, the story will be too long. Gran, I’d like some tea, too. Do we have any tea cakes?”

“We have pumpkin pie today.”

“That sounds good. Please warm it up and add some cream.”

She suddenly asks gran to prepare her some tea, and watches as she disappears to prepare it. I immediately realize she was intentionally getting gran out of the room.

“Really, what happened?” I ask Sakurako-san quietly.

She still seems unsure about what to say, but soon, she sighs and begins to speak.

"...I didn't expect Hanabusa to involve himself with us directly."

"What?"

I don't comprehend the true meaning of that for a second. Seeing her grim expression sends chills up my spine.

"...Then this letter… Is from Hanabusa?!"

"It seems like it."

I try to contain the desperation in my voice. Sakurako-san folds the letter with a sour expression.

"...Wait a second. The owner of the shop said that the customer who gave him that letter was there earlier." After realizing that, I'm shocked.

"What did you just say?"

All the blood drained from Sakurako-san's face.

"Then does that mean you saw Hanabusa?"

That's right. Hanabusa could have been right next to me at that point. No, maybe he wasn't. I could have been sitting there, carefree, drinking my tea while he was right there.

"I-I don't know! I didn't even think about that, so I didn't pay attention to any of the other customers…"

I frantically try to remember. It was the usual quiet atmosphere, without too many people. How many people were there? I think as hard as I can, but I can't remember. I really just can't remember. I wasn't at a window seat, I was sitting with my back to the register. I knew people were walking by me, but I didn't pay attention to each one.

"...That's enough. Anyway, refrain from going out alone for now. I'll ask Utsumi to patrol around your neighbourhood regularly. I'll ask Naoe to investigate Hanabusa when he has some spare time."

Is Hanabusa really going to target me? My heart is filled with fear. I wonder what was in that letter, but Sakurako-san immediately puts it in her back pocket. I don't think she wants me to see it. I feel a bit upset, since I'm involved in all of this too… I wonder if there's something there that she doesn't want me to know about? If that's the case, then how would Hanabusa know about it? A shiver runs up my spine.

"He's probably trying to scare us… The police… still don't believe that Hanabusa exists, right?"

"They can't catch him like this. He's like a butterfly, fluttering on the edge of the law. It's probably always been like that."

After the case with Satsuki-san, I thought the police would believe that Hanabusa exists. However, once again, they couldn't find any evidence that another person was involved, so Satsuki-san was determined to be the only offender. In her house, massive amounts of materials such as books on anatomy, and foreign serial killers were discovered. They also suspected her strange behaviour during the case. The police and news were more interested in the sudden violence and life of the young, up and coming photographer, rather than the phantom murdrer.

"He's very smart. The completely white bones from the other corpse showed no indication of the cause of death, so they aren't even close to establishing an identity. All they

could find out from the teeth was that the dental work was done by the dentist in the neighbourhood nearby. They don't know if work was done elsewhere as well. Unfortunately, Japan doesn't have a nationwide network yet."

"Then…"

"Neither the corpse found at the deserted house, nor the one found on the bank of a Junsai swamp have been identified. Also, since the corpse from Hakodate was completely skeletonized, identifying it is even more difficult**.** He won't be caught so easily… and not in the future, either."

The inside of my stomach feels cold, and hurts like it's being squeezed. I don't know what it all means. However, he's probably familiar with police investigations. Maybe he even has someone leaking information to him. Or what if he's pretending to be a cop himself?

"However, he also has rules."

"Rules?"

"That's right. He won't kill using his own hands. He's isn't the one with a knife, he only collects the bones after. If we're targeted, it won't be Hanabusa who kills us - it'll be someone close to us."

He corrodes another person's heart, making them into a puppet.

"You could say that's his aesthetic, but it's more like self defence. Satsuki and the others were Hanabusa's scapegoats. Even if he practically did it himself, since someone else committed the crime, he can evade the law. It's simple. Okay? Even close friends… no, you should be especially careful of close friends. Always be suspicious. Don't let your guard down. Even if it's your best friend. Hanabusa is skilled at manipulating people's hearts," Sakurako-san says, then hesitates for a moment. "Right, even if it's Yuriko or Isozaki, there's no exceptions."

"But that's…"

"No. From now on, don't trust anyone, no matter how close you are." Sakurako-san makes herself clear.

The unpleasant feeling inside of me feels like it's growing even more. Of course, I don't really think Hanabusa is going to target me. What would he gain from that? But if he realizes we're investigating him, he might feel threatened by me. If that happens, no matter how many times he attacks us, I won't give up. I've started sweating so much that I forgot how cold it is during the winter. I have to live with the fear that someone close to me could be after my life.

"...You too, I guess."

"I don't kill living things, no matter what. That's a rule I live by. There are no exceptions."

"I don't think I can doubt someone so close to me."

"What?"

It's easy to live in fear, but I don't want to. I take a deep breath and turn to Sakurako-san.

"At the very least Isozaki-sensei and Kougami… They know how sad it is to lose someone. They would never do something like that. Couldn't it be Hanabusa's plan to make us start jumping at our own shadows? At least, that's what I think. I can't suspect the people I love. I want to live by that rule. I won't give in to evil."

After I finish speaking, Sakurako-san puts her hand to her mouth like she's deep in thought. I wonder if she doesn't know what to say. Maybe even Sakurako-san doesn't have the answer to this.

“...It’s true that you have a point, but we can’t be careless. We have to be vigilant,” Sakurako-san finally says after a long silence. She lets out a deep sigh.

I notice her expression. I think this might be my chance.

“That’s true, but this is really scary. So please meet with me again, no matter what my mom says.”

“...What?”

“If Hanabusa-san tries to confront one of us, he might think only one of us is there. So please let me visit you again. Please let me protect you from him.”

Though even I think that’s a dishonest way of putting it. This is an opportunity for me. Hanabusa is scary, but not as scary as losing her.

“After all, you need to pay me back from when I got stabbed,” I say, trying my best to smile.

Besides, Hanabusa said he was targeting “us”. He didn’t list anyone specifically, but I would definitely be included, at least. If I’m in danger, that means she’s also in danger.

“I think it would be harder for Hanabusa if we’re together,” I say. I have no basis for that. However, I also need to protect her.

I’m powerless, but when push comes to shove, I want to at least be able to be her shield. Of course, I don’t want to go through that ever again, though.

“Please, Sakurako-san. Besides… if something happened to me, wouldn’t you regret not being there?” I say, bowing my head. The room is silent.

“...I understand.”

“Huh?”

“You’re right. I’d regret it if I lost you.” After a long sigh, Sakurako-san says that it can't be helped.

‘You’. Perhaps she said it without thinking, but I know who she lost before me. No, I told her because I knew. There’s a stinging pain in my chest.

“You can come here now. No, you can come here more often than before. Come whenever you want. Be sure to keep me informed every night. Not over email, I want to hear it from you directly.”

“Got it.”

‘Not over email’... I wonder if she’s talking about Phantom in a roundabout way. For a moment I want to ask about Phantom, and lift my head. However, in the unlikely event that it’s difficult to go see her again, I’d like to keep Phantom as insurance. I hold my tongue.

“Honestly… I feel like I just got caught up in your flow. I don’t like this unexpected stubborn side of you.”

“Then I won’t meet up with anyone else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Then… Let’s make a promise,” I say, smiling, and hold out my pinky finger.

She hesitates for a moment, then timidly holds out her finger. I tightly entwine our fingers, sealing the promise.

“I want to stay by your side from now on, so please don’t leave me. Even if you start to hate me.”

“Even if you hate me.” I faintly hear her say.

“Woof!” Hector can’t wait anymore, and jumps on Sakurako-san, ready to play.

Second Bone: Ghost Email

Part 1

It's a few days after Sakurako-san and I made a pinky swear. Despite our growing anxiety, nothing out of the ordinary has happened. For the past 3 days, I’ve been feeling constant unease because of Hanabusa. I get scared to do normal things like go to school, and I’ve been strangely jumpy. When my friends question me, I just tell them I’m not feeling so well. Sakurako-san told me to be cautious of them, but I really don’t want to doubt them. I’m angry at myself for letting Hanabusa control me like this.

“Shoutarou.”

“What?”

I thought Imai had already gone to his club, but he suddenly called out to me.

“I’d like to ask a favour of you.”

“A favour? From me? That’s a new one.”

He’s a whole 12cm taller than me, so he has to look down at me. Both the sides of his hair are cut short with it longer on top. He’s good at sports, he’s nice and his grades aren’t bad, so even though he’s shy about it, I’d consider him to be a good looking guy.

“Hey… Kougami is the one that asked me to do it.”

“Kougami did?”

“It was a while ago, and sudden. No, well, not that sudden, we met in the library.”

“Hm?”

He has such an easygoing personality. Most people say they have no idea what Imai is thinking. It’s unusual for him to ask something so formally like this. For some reason, though, he’s popular with girls. In fact, I know of several girls who have confessed to him. It’s troublesome for him, though, since he just wants to focus on tennis. I was surprised to find out he had an unrequited crush on Kougami. I think I like Kougami just as much as I like Imai. I hope things go well for them, but they aren’t making any progress.

“I don’t really know what’s up, but what do you want me to help with?” I ask.

It’d be nice if those two could get along. It’s lonely not being able to invite both of them to places.

“I think you’re better suited for it than me, Shoutarou.”

“Okay, what do I need to do?” I agree, so we head to the library.

When we get there, Kougami is reading a book called “coincidence” (which Imai emphasizes) at the middle table. She seems to be investigating something, since she’s repeatedly opening and closing books, and heading to different shelves. Eventually, she gets to a book where she has difficulty putting it back on the shelf. Imai goes over to help.

“Hey, I’m tall enough to reach,” he whispers.

Are we helping her get the books she needs? Kougami must have taken some books from the shelves that she needs to put back. When I look at the books, they're all about horror-like things, such as the occult, youkai, and psychics. Imai asks Kougami if she likes this kind of thing. If so, that would explain why she was so excited about going to a horror movie on the weekend. However, Kougami just says "well, not really… That's why I'm asking my friends," with a bitter smile.

What am I even supposed to be investigating right now?

"Huh? You're looking into urban legends?"

"Yeah. There's a story about ghosts appearing in Kannondai. Apparently she's looking into it for her friends, but she's having trouble making any progress."

"I see…"

Still, it's kind of a strange story. Investigating an urban legend for her friends… How does that even happen?

"I offered to help her, but… I'm not good with horror. I also wanted to focus on my club…"

"So basically you want me to help out in your place?"

"I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm begging you, Shoutarou."

Doesn't it defeat the purpose if I take his place? Even so, when he asks me like that, it's hard to say no. I can't reject him, so I offer to help. Kougami doesn't hesitate to accept more help.

"Then you'll have to treat me to yakiniku sometime."

"...Alright." After a moment of hesitation, Imai nods.

I'll have to work hard to earn my reward. After school the next day, I visit Kougami. "Huh? Where's Imai-kun?" she asks, looking confused.

"He wanted to help you, but he couldn't skip his club. He was worried about you, so he asked me to take over. Sorry."

"No, it's fine, but… I see, he was worried. I know Imai-kun is aiming for the Hokkaido tournament this year, so I didn't want to trouble him…" Kougami is in the tennis club, too, so she looks really apologetic.

Imai was really disappointed last year after he didn't make it. Of course, I keep quiet about the fact that he gets scared so easily that he ran in a full sprint through the haunted house at the festival.

"I might not be able to do as good of a job as he could, is that okay?"

"Yeah." She nods and smiles.

"...Actually, I wanted to ask you from the beginning, Tatewaki-kun, but… I feel like I always rely too much on you."

"You don't have to worry about that. My injury is all healed now, too."

"Yeah, but…" Kougami lowers her head a bit.

It's been like this ever since I got back from Hakodate. Even Utsumi-san asked me if I'm okay with a serious look on his face when I coincidentally met up with him while he was on patrol. I feel overwhelmed by how much everyone is worrying about me. Of course I'm glad people are worried about my safety, but deep down, I strangely dislike it.

"So then, what do I need to know?" I cut right to the chase.

I listen to what she'd learned, but it doesn't sound like she's made much progress. However, I know someone who's good at unravelling mysteries. When I mention it to Kougami, she smiles and says "I was thinking about that, too."

So, we strike while the iron is hot. We head to Sakurako-san's house on foot.

Part 2

It seems there's guests visiting Sakurako-san's house. When we get closer, I see Sakurako-san talking to a man in a friendly manner, and putting a shawl on him.

"Oh! Is your injury healed now, boy?"

Before I even know who he is, the young man looks back at me and smiles. He's Sawa-san, who works at Asahiyama zoo. I smile back.

"I'm fine now. Thank you for visiting me."

After I say my thanks, Kougami asks me who he is with an urging gaze. When I tell her that he's gran's relative and a zookeeper at Asahiyama zoo, she greets him with a bow. Sawa-san smiles back at her. Kougami's cheeks turn a bit red, and she lowers her gaze. Does Kougami like guys with a good build? Go for it, Imai.

"Did you like the books?"

"Yeah… well…" I say evasively.

When Sawa-san visited me in the hospital, he gave me several interesting, easy to understand books about skeletal specimens and anatomy that were written by a biology teacher. When I'm discharged, I'll definitely make a specimen, too! I considered it for a moment, but ended up narrowly escaping from getting pulled in by Sawa-san. Unlike Sakurako-san, he's both good at working with bones, and socializing.

"Eiji! Young lady, take this with you, as well." While I try to deceive Sawa-san, gran comes out of the house holding a paper bag.

"Here, you like alcohol, don't you?"

"Gran and I don't usually drink. At most, gran uses it in cooking. Naoe is always on call for work, so he can't normally let himself loose."

Inside the bag is a bottle of expensive western wine. It must have been a gift. It's true that I have seen Sakurako-san drink before, but it's not very often. Even when she has dinner with Ariwara-san she doesn't have any alcohol.

"Oh, and here's some of the beef tsukudani you like… and some pickled herring, too. We've had it for a while, so please eat it soon. Oh, and one more thing…" Gran puts more plastic containers filled with food into the paper bag.

"That's plenty enough, gran," Sawa-san says with a forced smile. However, gran has already gone back into the house to get more.

"I hope you like leftovers," Sakurako-san says, patting Sawa-san on the shoulder.

Gran seems to treat Sawa-san like he's her grandson. People in Hokkaido can't let their guests leave empty handed. When I leave my relatives' houses, I always feel like I end up leaving with way more than I came with. Gran always makes me smile when I'm with her. I

figure it'll take a while, so I watch Hector play in the piles of snow. He sticks his nose into the piles and wags his tail. I notice Kougami looking out at the street.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. I just got a bad feeling from that car."

She points in the opposite direction from the house. There's a car that's parked on the other side of the road, covered in a blue plastic tarp.

"Do you think there's something wrong with that car?"

"It's been there for 3 days."

It wasn't there last time I was here. I ask Sakurako-san about it, but she shrugs. It's been cold for the past few days, but it hasn't snowed much. In the past 2 or 3 days, about 10cm of snow has piled up on it. The license plate seems to have been removed.

"It does… Kinda give off a bad feeling."

I shiver. It makes me think of Hanabusa. My eyes meet Sawa-san's. He hands me the paper bag, and heads toward the suspicious car.

"...Sawa-san?!"

"It's definitely creepy, let's investigate."

What if there's a corpse inside? I nervously glance back. Sawa-san pulls off the plastic tarp, causing a huge sound when the snow falls off. Soon, a car with a severely damaged front end appears.

"...Was this car in an accident?"

"There's no corpse" Sawa-san pretends like he doesn't notice my anxiety.

"Of course there's not. If there were a dead body inside, Hector would have let us know immediately," Sakurako-san says as she walks toward the car. I also run over with the paper bag.

It's a compact car, like a minivan. It's a metallic silver, and doesn't look old. The hood and bumper are dented and broken, and rust is starting to form on the damaged parts.

"But this… It looks like they hit something…" My voice shakes.

The dents are unusual. Additionally, there's clearly marked blood stains on the hood, dirt, something that looks like hair, and unknown bodily fluids dried on it. Behind me, Hector lets out a cheerful bark.

"Then this was… a person, right?"

"I wonder. Hector also reacts to animal carcasses," Sakurako-san says, shrugging.

Sawa-san is kneeling to examine the dented portion on the front. Kougami is uneasy, and grabs the sleeve of my coat. I want to comfort her by saying it's going to be okay, but I can't bring myself to say it when I don't really know if it will be.

"...It might not have been a human," Sawa-san says as he stands up.

"Huh?"

"Do you see the hair stuck to this part?" He says, pointing to the short, light brown hair stuck to the car. It's viscerally unpleasant, and makes me want to look away. "I think this was probably a deer."

"A deer?!"

“Yeah. The hair seems like a deer’s, and when a car hits a deer it usually causes dents like this. I’m sure they were surprised,” Sawa-san says, then explains that the reddish stains on the car aren’t just from blood.

Ezo deer are big. Any car unlucky enough to hit one suffers some serious damage.

“The car probably wasn’t going too fast, but the deer was probably injured.”

I’m glad that it wasn’t a person, but I’m not happy that the deer got hurt. Kougami breathes a sigh of relief.

“But then… Why did they leave it here instead of getting it repaired?”

“Who knows?”

“As Sawa-san said, even if it hit a deer, it might have been a stolen vehicle. I think it would be best to report it. Besides, it’s an eyesore,” Sakurako-san says.

It’s true that an abandoned car in front of your house doesn't make for a nice view.

“...It was a woman’s car, I think,” Kougami says timidly as she peers into the car.

“Why do you think that?”

“There’s a little perfume bottle in the cup holder.” Kougami points to a small, square bottle with a ribbon tied around it on the driver’s side. “It’s Chloe perfume, so I don’t think many men would be wearing it.”

“Couldn’t it have been the owner’s girlfriend or something?”

“Then it would be on the passenger’s side, wouldn’t it?”

She does have a point. Kougami looks to Sakurako-san with an uneasy expression. Sakurako-san rubs her back to calm her down.

They both have such beautiful black hair that from behind, they look like sisters. I wonder if Soutarou-kun was Sakurako-san’s sister rather than her brother, if Kougami would have taken my place as a replacement to the Kujo family? I feel overwhelmed by anxiety.

Sawa-san returns to his own car, which is parked in front of the house, and tells gran about what happened. He comes back quickly. Sawa-san seems to be busy as usual when we go to see him off, but he looks lonely somehow. I guess he wanted us to make a skeletal specimen together this time. When I meekly tell him that, he smiles ecstatically and says “I’ll contact you another time, then.”

“So then, what happened to you two today?” Sakurako-san asks while we’re on our way back to her house after seeing Sawa-san off. She doesn’t sound annoyed, just curious.

“About that… there’s something we wanted to ask you about, Sakurako-san.”

“Me?”

“Yeah… it’s not like a case or any trouble or anything, we just thought you might be able to help us figure something out,” Kougami says while we head to the living room.

Once Sakurako settles down in her favourite chair, she says “go ahead and ask. I don’t know if I can help, though.” However, there’s no trace of a lack of confidence on her face while she speaks.

The police are on their way, so gran is busy preparing a big teapot and hourglass for the table. I help prepare the tea set and cream puffs, and leave the rest to Kougami.

“So, what’s the story”

“Ah, right. There’s a girl in my class that I’m close to named Hitomi. She’s the one that asked me about this.” Kougami sounds a little tense as she begins to speak. “Hitomi is a

member of the broadcasting club. She wants to work as an announcer in the future. So, she started an out of season ghost story and urban legend corner on the announcements during lunch every Thursday."

"It's interesting. Her narration is pretty good. I look forward to it every week, too."

"Yeah, it's pretty popular."

"Thursday Ghost Story" is a weekly program that started last summer. The calm voice, perfect use of pauses, and unique sound effects really make it feel real and scary. I always end up listening to it. It's so popular that it kept going, even through winter. In addition to famous ghost stories, there's ones like someone being chased by the upper half of a corpse dragging itself along the ground, ghosts at foreign graveyards, abandoned hotels where ghosts appear, and spirits that beckon you toward the bottom of Kamui Kotan river. There's even local ghost stories and urban legends from Asahikawa. I always look forward to it.

"At the end of the segment, she asks for people to share ghost stories or urban legends they know with her. There's someone who submitted a story anonymously." Kougami takes out her phone and begins to read an email that I assume is from Hitomi-san.

It was a hot, moonless summer night on a Friday. Girl A was waiting for her friend at the station, but her friend cancelled last minute. She left the station, and started wondering what to do instead, when a white car pulled up beside her. The driver, a young man who said his name was Masahiro, told Girl A that he had a falling out with his friend, so he had some spare time. She was invited to hang out with him if she had the time. Since Girl A was bored, and Masahiro seemed like a good conversationalist, so she accepted.

She got in the car and the two of them headed to a family restaurant to get something to eat. Masahiro said that he wanted to go to Kannondai... It wasn't too far away, and Girl A wanted to stick around with Masahiro, so she went with him. However, he drove past the night viewing spot, and headed for Kannon cemetery.

Girl A said she was scared, but Masahiro said they were just going on a walk. He took her to a certain gravestone, but once she turned around, he vanished. Though she was scared, Girl A noticed that the name on the gravestone said Masahiro. The date of death said July 25th, X year. The same day they went for a drive. She was confused, and tried to leave, but the car was gone. Then, she heard something. It was an email notification from an unknown address. The email just said the word "die," repeated endlessly…

"It seems like a common story… and it would be too weak for an episode. But since it takes place in a really specific location, Hitomi said she was worried about who sent the story."

Kougami's hands seem tense as she pours tea into her cup. Sakurako-san reaches for a cream puff, unable to wait any longer.

It certainly is a common story… But since it took place in an area I know, it made it easier to imagine, and a bit scarier.

"Have you heard that story, Tatewaki-kun?"

"No… I don't think so." I shake my head.

Kougami nods. She pours tea for Sakurako-san, me, then herself before continuing.

“Right? Hitomi and I hadn’t, either… It feels like a “heard it from a friend of a friend” kind of story, but if it hasn’t spread very far, it’ll be easy to get to the origin of the story. That’s what Hitomi was thinking, anyway.”

Sakurako-san uses the crispy outer shell of the cream puff so scoop out the cream from inside to eat. I also reach out and grab one without hesitation. The outer layer has the pleasant scent of butter. The custard inside is thick and creamy. It’s topped off with pure white cream. There’s crunchy, bittersweet caramel chips hidden under the cream on top. With so many different textures and different sweetnesses, this is truly a masterpiece of a cream puff.

“Hitomi’s new project is to find the root of this urban legend! She was thinking of starting a new segment like that. Because of that we started investigating it, but we haven’t found anything. We don’t even have the name of the person who contributed the story.”

“It’s kind of creepy that you don’t even know the name of the contributor.”

“Yeah… but Hitomi doesn’t actually believe in ghosts. That’s why she wants to find a good method to get to the root of this story. So, Sakurako-san… would you know a good way to find out?” Kougami looks up at Sakurako-san, looking deeply troubled.

“...What do you want me to do?” Sakurako-san, who is still eating cream she scoops out with the skin, furrows her brow, puzzled.

“Anything… I just wanted some advice, like always,” Kougami says with a lack of confidence. She bites the cream puff she’s holding in both hands. Kougami wipes the cream off her mouth with her finger. She looks like she’s realizing how difficult her request is.

“Unfortunately, I’m not a magician. There’s not enough information. Given the information that you have, I don’t think you have much choice but to look for the contributor within the school.” She shrugs, and gives the advice she can, since she was asked.

“Yeah, that’s kind of what I thought…” Kougami looks disappointed, and stares at her cream puffs. It looks like the cream could spill out at any second, so she probably isn’t really ‘looking at it’.

“That type of story doesn’t particularly interest me… But since you’re relying on me, I can’t just ignore you. I’m a bit busy right now, but if there’s anything I can do to help, I would gladly do whatever I can.”

“What are you busy with?”

I tilt my head to the side. In the winter, field work is difficult and dangerous. The best she’d get at this time of year is fish bones, and maybe some requests from a zoo or university. Besides that, it should just be regular maintenance. Shouldn’t winter be a boring time for her, since she doesn’t have to go to work or do chores?

While I’m thinking, Hector brings me a ball, so I pet him absentmindedly. Apparently I’m not enough for him, so he targets Kougami this time. He puts his nose on her lap, and looks up at her with his big, sparkling eyes like he’s saying, “let’s play, Yuriko-san.” Kougami just can’t resist his cuteness. Kougami tosses the ball a bit for Hector. I look to Sakurako-san, who is finishing her cream puff. Her expression seems awfully grim.

“...Oh, that’s right. Did something happen with Hanabusa?” Sakurako-san nods.

“I’m doing as much as I can. I contacted an acquaintance of mine who works in forensic pathology. I asked them if they’ve seen any cases that match Hanabusa’s. I asked them to keep

an eye on current cases, as well as looking into past ones. I contacted Yamaji, too," Sakurako-san says forcefully.

"Sakurako-san, um…"

I find myself wondering about the contents of that letter, and about what she muttered when she read it. When I looked into it, all I found was the Cramer's 88 butterfly. It lives in central and South America, and has patterns that look like the number 88 on its wings. But how does that relate to the letter she got? I want to ask about the letter, but Kougami and gran are both here. If they knew, I'm sure they would be worried. I have to hold my tongue.

"Then I'll work together with Kougami. There's no point in worrying about it."

"You're right. It's good to relax sometimes. I don't want it to get in the way of your school life. That's my role. If you understand, then go," Sakurako-san says.

Kougami says she's going to go home for today, so I decide to head home, too. Before I leave, Sakurako-san asks me, "has anything changed?"

"Not particularly… I'm fine," I reply with a forced smile. She fixes the front of my coat for me and adjusts my scarf. It's such a casual gesture, like I'm really her younger brother. Realizing that fills me with irritation, discomfort, and sadness, so I brush her hands away.

"...It was crooked." She looks surprised for a moment, then excuses herself.

"I'm not a child, I can do it myself."

Kougami looks at me suspiciously. "What's wrong?" She asks me, her voice full of worry.

"Nothing, really." Even I'm surprised by how rude my voice sounds.

It's not really because of Sakurako-san, or about how she was worried about me. I'm sad because I pushed her away. I didn't want her to make that face. I know that I should just meekly accept her kind gestures. I'm angry that I can't control my own heart.

Part 3

The next day, we both immediately start working on trying to find someone who knows about urban legends, starting with our own class. Unfortunately, as Kougami's friend, Hitomi Ootsu, said, most of the answers are disappointing. Still, it's pretty interesting to investigate something as vague as urban legends. How the stories change as people retell them, and where they started. After talking to all my classmates, I couldn't get any real answers.

I'm feeling disheartened, but then I see Isozaki-sensei, my home room teacher, carrying some teaching materials. I've heard teachers saying before that he's so weak, he can hardly carry anything heavier than gardening shears. I'll probably have to help him sort paperwork, but this is perfect. I've got nothing to lose, so I decide to ask him about the urban legend.

"The ghost of Kannondai, huh…"

It was early autumn of last year when we cleaned up the science prep room. It's like a completely different room now. Since Isozaki-sensei is in charge of it now, it's decorated with various potted plants. I sit next to him and start stapling the bundle of papers. He frowns at my question.

"So you don't know either, after all…"

“Well, these kinds of occultic stories become popular from time to time. It’s probably been mixed up with other stories, come from a rumour at another school, or something like that.”

“Another school… in that case, I don’t even know where to start.”

Certainly, there’s a lot of tools for communication out there now. Maybe they just replaced some words in a story they found online with places from around Asahikawa.

“Still, I want to investigate the origin of it just a little deeper,” I say.

Isozaki-sensei lets out a sigh. When his moderately long bangs sway, it smells like a girl. It’s different from Ariwara-san. He smells more like flowers, but somehow it seems fitting for him.

“With social media and texting these days, it’s easy for word of something to get around. I don’t mind if you want to investigate it but… don’t let it impact your health or studies,” Isozaki-sensei says while organizing the papers on his desk. His voice sounds so serious. It’s a little strange. “...What?”

It seems he noticed me vacantly staring at him while I was thinking. He gives me a weird look.

“Nothing. It’s just that it feels that was like the first time you said something that sounded like a teacher.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what it sounds like.”

At least, Isozaki-sensei isn’t really the kind of person to talk about minding your health and studies and all that. Even during home room just before winter break started, he said “just behave yourselves, but otherwise do whatever you feel like.” When I start to laugh because he said something so unusual, Isozaki-sensei wrinkles his nose for a moment. However, rather than scold me, he just lets out another sigh.

“...I can’t say you’re wrong, but it makes me a little angry to hear you say it out loud. You’re calm when it comes to dangerous things, but I’m the exact opposite.”

“Calm?”

“Like with Kujo-san. Personally, I don’t hate her, but those kinds of people tend to get into risky situations. Basically what I’m saying is that people like her and Hanabusa will probably never change.”

“What did you say?!”

I’ve never seen him with such a serious expression. He’s staring straight at me. He must be telling me his true feelings. That only causes the anger in me to grow. There are some things a teacher just shouldn’t say.

“What do you mean? I don’t hate Kujo-san. I’m not trying to say anything bad about her. It’s just that her morals don’t line up with the rules the rest of society has. To her, it’s just unimportant. It’s not a personal issue. I think it’s just that her brain doesn’t recognize it as something important.”

“But…”

“Kujo-san lives by different rules than you, too. Things that are obvious or normal to you aren’t to her.”

I want to say something, anything, to refute him, but I can’t. I don’t know how many times I’ve thought the exact same thing. I can hardly bring myself to speak.

“But she has people to guide her. Not people who can explain vague things like ‘ethics’ or ‘justice’, but people who understand them and can help her. People like her uncle, gran, Ms. Chiyoda, and Ariwara-san.”

That’s right. She at least won’t disobey her uncle or gran. Sakurako-san is an awkward person, but even so, she still has her own form of love. She’s especially sensitive to sadness. That’s not a problem for her. She’s especially kind to those who have been left behind by loved ones. She feels their sadness like it’s her own.

“Even if she doesn’t understand, she’d never betray what gran tells her. Sakurako-san would never want to see her loved ones upset,” I say clearly. It’s the truth, I’m sure of it. Yet Isozaki-sensei still sighs.

“But… You went with Kujo-san to Hakodate.”

I know just what he’s trying to say here. His voice sounds displeased. I’m at a loss for words.

“Maybe I’m similar to Kujo-san in some way. That’s why I understand. All we need is flowers and specimens. But you can’t get mixed up with crimes. You absolutely cannot.”

I understand what he’s trying to say. She basically makes a hobby out of trying to oppose other people. She knew that, so she asked me to cooperate. We ran around Hakodate, keeping it a secret from Shouko-san. As a result, I was seriously injured. Of course, I know that Sakurako-san did all that because of her uncle. If I hadn’t gone with her, she definitely would have chased after Satsuki-san on her own. That’s just the kind of person she is.

She’s so smart, but she tends to lose sight of her surroundings when she focuses on something too hard. It doesn’t matter if she risks me or herself, as long as she achieves her goal. She’s willing to use any means necessary, and shed morals for the sake of her goal… perhaps that makes her as dangerous as Hanabusa.

“I’m not a good teacher, and I’m not so keen on education to know how students think, but I think what’s important is that you really know yourself, Shoutarou,” Isozaki-sensei says, then reaches for my bangs to adjust them a little. He rests his chin on top of my head. “I’ve already attended the funeral for 2 of my students, don’t make me go to another one,” he says quietly.

My chest feels tight with guilt. I wish I hadn’t worried him.

“Besides… Sakurako-san has nothing to do with it this time.”

“That’s fine, then.”

Isozaki-sensei pulls away from me, and smacks me on the top of the head. He tells me I should go. I feel like I shouldn’t leave without saying anything, but I also really understand that he’s deeply worried about me.

“Isozaki-sensei, um…”

“Yeah?”

He’s already lowered his head so he can focus on the paperwork, but he gives me a sidelong glance. I think about telling him about Hanabusa’s threatening letter. Hanabusa’s shadow may be creeping up on those around me.

“...Um, make sure you’re careful.”

“Okay”

When I see his face, I can't bring myself to say it. It'll just worry him, and if I go out of my way to mention it to him, it'll seem like I'm suspicious of him.

"Anyway, just don't go overboard, okay?"

"Understood."

I leave the science prep room. Somehow, I'm left with a foggy feeling as I walk away. I notice Kougami in the hallway, and run up to her.

"Find anything out?"

"Nope, no luck." Kougami looks at me expectantly. I shake my head. "I see… That's what I thought." She drops her gaze, looking disappointed. She probably expected to have found at least some information by now.

"I'll try asking my senpai," she says, turning away. She lets out a small sigh.

There isn't much I can do. Starting tomorrow we're going to have to question people from a different grade.

"Yuriko!"

I head into the classroom to grab my bag, then suddenly hear someone calling for Kougami from the hallway.

"Ayako?"

What's going on? I turn around to see a girl running up to Kougami. Her hair is dyed, which is against school regulations. She has thin eyebrows and a skirt so short that it makes you wonder if she's cold like that. Kougami wears black tights under her skirt, but this girl is wearing knee high socks. She's cute, but she seems like a difficult type of girl.

"I heard you're going around asking people about weird stories. Hey… Are you investigating the urban legend Hitomi was talking about?"

"Yeah."

"Did she ask you to help?"

Kougami just keeps nodding her head. The girl called Ayako grimaces.

"That kind of stuff… Isn't it bad luck to poke your head into it? Maybe you should stop."

"Why?"

"Cause ever since Hitomi started that weird segment, two people have died in a row. Even my mom got involved in an accident when she was on her bike. Isn't it kind of dangerous? Isn't it… Kind of like we're being haunted?" 'Ayako' says, shivering. She looks really scared. She must really believe in ghosts.

"Isn't that just a coincidence?" I say. 'Ayako' glares at me.

"But what'll you do if it really means something?!"

"W-well…"

Her voice is so loud, I'm surprised.

"Anyway, I think it's better if she focuses on studying. If she seriously wants to be an announcer, Hitomi can't be spending all her time playing around… she's always been quick to become absorbed in things and forget her priorities!" 'Ayako' says, as she stands up. It sounds like something she should talk to Ootsu about. She looks back and forth between Kougami and I frantically.

Just then, a second year comes down the stairs. He tells "Ayako" that he's going home. He's in the soccer club. I know him because he's the school's FW9.

“Okaaay,” ‘Ayako’ replies. She suddenly hugs Kougami. “Please, you really have to stop this! Don’t get involved anymore, Yuri!” She says to Kougami, then lets go of her and runs toward our senpai.

She grabs their arm that’s closest to her, and pushes her body against his. Maybe they’re going out.

“See ya!”

We wave at “Ayako” as she heads down the stairs. Maybe she doesn’t want the one she’s dating to know, but she spoke with a strangely cheerful voice. I look at Kougami, troubled. Kougami goes along with it, smiling and waving back. Once we can’t see her anymore, Kougami lets out a sigh.

“Just now… That was Ayako, Hitomi’s childhood friend.”

“I see.”

Kougami tells me about how “Ayako” - Ayako Endou, Ootsu, and her all went to middle school together.

“But… Ayako and Hitomi aren’t getting along well these days.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t know everything, but… Their friendship seems to have run its course, and they hang out with different groups now.” Kougami seems like she’s choosing her words very carefully.

“Groups?”

“Yeah. For girls, it’s whoever you go with when you go to the bathroom. It can be a big part of your high school life,” She says, sounding a bit self-deprecating. She gives me an unusually sarcastic smile. I’m surprised.

At school, I don’t usually see Kougami alone. I’ve definitely seen her going with a big group to the bathroom. She always smiles and looks happy. I’m surprised she has that kind of expression while talking about those people. Kougami seems to notice what I’m thinking, and quickly adds, “it’s not really that bad, of course.”

“Oh, and also, Ayako is dating someone. A second year from the soccer club. Ayako has always been easily influenced, so she’s really into soccer now. Apparently she’s playing futsal now.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Well… Ayako and Hitomi were both in the art club in middle school, so they’ve always been more of the indoors type. Ever since Ayako started hanging out with different people, she’s turned into a completely different person,” Kougami says, sounding uncomfortable.

I’m not confident that I fully understand everything, but to put it simply, she chose her lover over her best friend.

“But I think Ayako and Hitomi still worry about each other, since they’re still friends.” Kougami sighs. She looks troubled.

“...Kougami, do you really think it’s a curse? With the ghost, I mean.”

“No, I don’t,” she says, shaking her head. “Because if ghosts really exist, my grandma would come to visit me.” She sounds really sure of it. I nod.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

I'm sure it's true. There couldn't really be ghosts. In that case, what are we looking for? I don't like this overpowering eerie feeling, even if it's not something supernatural. Maybe Endou was right, and we shouldn't be getting involved in this.

Part 4

The day after, I ask around at some of the older classes. After leaving the school, I can't help but head to Sakurako-san's place. After I clear some of the snow from the front of the house, there's hot milk and freshly made doughnuts waiting for me.

Made from pancake mix, the doughnuts are slightly sweet. They're brown-ish, like the colour of a fox, and taste like home. I used to make these with my grandma. I especially loved cutting out the hole in the middle. Gran uses a cutter, though. However, when I take a bite, gran's doughnuts taste considerably better. I can taste the butter and vanilla, and it has the characteristic elasticity of freshly fried food.

"This is my secret recipe, she adds yogurt and sanontou," Gran says, adding more freshly fried doughnuts to the plate.

Once they cool down a bit, they're even fluffier, and have a superb texture. I didn't tell my mom I was coming here, so I say I have to go soon. Gran asks me if I want some that have cooled off already. Of course I agree. These doughnuts remind me of the ones my grandma made that I miss so much. My grandma added a bit of cinnamon to hers, and sprinkled powdered sugar on top. As a kid, I didn't like the scent of cinnamon, but now the scent makes me feel a little lonely. Of course gran's doughnuts are delicious, too.

"So then… did you find out about it?" Sakurako-san asks. She picks up a doughnut and rips it in half, causing steam to rise in the air before she eats it.

"No. Nobody knows anything about the story."

Starting next week, we're mostly going to be asking upperclassmen about it. I ask gran for another cup of milk as I explain. The milk is cold this time. Freshly fried doughnuts have to be eaten with cold milk. It should be a law.

"Actually, I also did some investigating yesterday."

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san spreads a few pieces of paper in front of me. They seem to be photocopies of newspaper articles.

"I limited the date and place to Kannondai on July 25th. I went to the library and picked up some articles from old newspapers. Since the story mentioned an email, I limited it to the last 15 years."

She picks up one of the papers. Sure enough, there weren't any obituaries for a young man named Masahiro on that day. There's no record of a young man named Masahiro dying on July 25th in the last 15 years. Of course, there's also a chance that they refused to have it published. Or maybe it's because Hokkaido is so big, and every newspaper has an obituaries column every single day.

I remember when my grandma died. Of course there was the option to decline, but it doesn't cost anything. It listed the funeral home, and the time and place of her death.

"There was something interesting in a newspaper from this year. A few days after July 25th, a woman's body was found in the park near Kannon cemetery. It's possible that her suicide and this incident are connected. However, it seems to have become a popular spot for suicides in recent years, too."

"Suicide…"

If you're talking about famous suicide spots in Asahikawa, the first to come to mind is Kamui Kotan, which is a popular spot for ghost sightings. I've heard before that Kaguraoka Park and Kannondai are places where people make unfortunate choices.

"The woman was named Akiko Muratsubaki. She was 21 years old. She had voiced before that she was suicidal," Sakurako-san says indifferently. The short articles in the newspaper are just as indifferent and matter-of-fact.

"...I wonder if it's really related."

"Who knows?" Sakurako-san says she doesn't know much more than that. Unfortunately, reading the articles doesn't turn up any new information, either.

"It's not like I can talk to the family directly or anything." I feel backed into a corner.

"No. There aren't too many people with that last name. Should we try the phone book?" Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders.

"What? Do you really want to go that far?"

It seems like overkill. Still, Sakurako-san asks gran to bring over a phone book, and starts searching through it. I thought it seemed like an unusual name, but there's several families with the same one.

She hands me a cordless phone, and starts dialing in the first number. I still don't know what to say. After hesitating, I decide to explain that I'm writing a piece for my school's "promoting good mental health" week. For that, I want to ask the survivors for a few words. It's just a convenient lie I came up with. I just remembered that there was a printout on the bulletin board that was titled "For the Heart~".

Muratsubaki-san, who I'm on the phone with, seems to believe me. They tell me that they're related to Akiko Muratsubaki, although not a direct family member. I ask if I can talk with Akiko-san's parents. While I wait for the call to come, feelings of guilt and regret from lying swell in my chest. I ask Akiko-san's mother if we can meet and talk. We plan to meet tomorrow afternoon, so she gives me her contact information.

The next day, I eat my mom's special omelette rice, then head to Sakurako-san's house. I'm torn between wanting to go alone and wanting to go with her. Sakurako-san can sometimes show deep compassion for bereaved families. However, at the same time, she often throws thoughtless, sharp words at people. However, I'm not sure if I'll be able to say and ask the right things if I go alone. I also need transportation.

Akiko-san's parents' house is in Kamui. In summer I could easily go 30-50km on my cross bike, but not in winter. Speaking of winter in Kamui, there's Kamui Ski Links. It's a ski resort. In the evening when the hills are lit up orange, I find myself staring at nothing in particular. When I was in elementary and middle school, my grandpa used to take me skiing. Even in high school, I still go to Kamui by bus during the skiing season. I'm not that good, but I

don’t dislike skiing. After skiing lessons, rice balls for lunch taste exceptional. I wish I could go skiing right now.

I keep thinking about things like that in Sakurako-san’s car while we head to the Muratsubaki’s house in Kamui. I wonder if Sakurako-san can skii. Her motor skills aren’t bad, but somehow I can’t imagine her being into sports.

“Are you interested in winter sports, Sakurako-san? Like skiing?”

“I’ve been skiing several times in the past,” she says without looking at me.

I got the answer I expected.

“Then, between swimming and skiing, which do you prefer?”

“...Swimming, I guess.”

That’s unexpected. It’s even harder to imagine her swimming than skiing. But maybe it’s nice. Her bathing suit would definitely be white. I wonder if it’d be a bikini?

“Then… let’s go to the beach this year.”

It’s not like I have an ulterior motive, or anything. However, I do kind of want to see Sakurako-san in a bathing suit. Of course we’d invite Ariwara-san, too. We could invite Shouko-san, and Utsumi-san, too. It might be fun with lots of people.

“It’s nice to look for bones on the beach, but I could do without all the sand and salt. Thus, I’d like to firmly refuse.”

“Hmph… Well, I thought that might be the case.”

“...But the pool might be nice. I like diving under the water. Listening to the sounds underwater makes me kind of feel like a dolphin.”

“Do you like dolphins?” That was kind of unexpected.

“They’re beautiful. I can show you their bones later. My uncle used to collect fossilized dolphin ear bones for a while.”

“Dolphin ear bones?”

“Yes. They’re often considered a good luck charm.”

I wonder why? It’s just a bone, after all. I force a smile. Even though it’s just a fossil, it’s considered lucky. Hearing things like that makes me feel a bit brighter. Eventually, the car stops in front of the house, making me feel gloomy all over again.

“I wonder… If it’s okay to do this just for my own curiosity.”

“The dead don’t have feelings.”

“What about the family? I can’t imagine they would be too happy about it.” I’m doing something unforgivable.

“If you don’t like it, you can leave. If you want to talk to them, now is the time,” Sakurako-san says.

I feel guilty, like I’m peeping at something I shouldn’t be. Maybe I shouldn’t do this if I’m feeling guilty. At first glance, the house seems to be falling apart with age. It’s a detached house, the white siding is cracked, and the paint is chipping. My mom manages an apartment, so I know a bit about buildings. Over time, the siding gets destroyed when moisture gets into the cracks, then freezes repeatedly.

I wonder why these people aren’t taking care of their house? They should really fix it before it gets worse… I ring the intercom. Before long, a woman answers. Surprisingly, the

slender woman welcomes us after we introduce ourselves. She says, “come right in,” in a bright voice.

“It’s cold out today, so hurry inside.” She warmly invites us inside.

She must have warmed up the room for us. Coming from outside, the room feels almost too warm. She’s also wearing a long, thick knit skirt. Her hair is pulled back, making it hard to tell her age. She looks too young to have a daughter over 20 years old, though.

“Doing a project about the weight of a human life… Even high school students are looking into such difficult things.”

Akiko-san’s mother brings us to the living room, and invites us to sit on the couch. She brings me an elegant cup of coffee with a picture of wild strawberries on it. Sakurako-san refuses, and asks for water instead. With great trouble, I refuse the coffee as it is, and have to put 2 sugar sticks and 2 portions of cream in it to be able to drink it. Akiko-san’s mother furrows her brow.

“That’s right, you’re only in high school, so you probably would have preferred orange juice. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking…” She seems flustered and bows.

“I’m just not good with black coffee. I love cafe lattes though,” I tell her. I’m not sure if she really believes me, though. She gives me a lonely smile.

The room is too warm for me, so soon I start to sweat. I take off my parka, leaving just my V-neck that I was wearing underneath. Sakurako-san’s glass of water is also sweating. However, as usual, Sakurako-san is totally unruffled.

“Let’s cut right to the chase. Could you tell us about your daughter?” Sakurako-san gets to the reason for our visit abruptly. Akiko-san’s mother gives us another lonesome smile.

“That’s right… but, I only married her father 5 years ago, so… I can’t tell you very many details,” Akiko-san’s mother says. Or rather, stepmother.

She gets up for a moment, and returns with an album. It doesn’t look too old. She shows us a few pictures.

“I think this is the newest photo. It’s from a few days before her suicide.”

She hands me a picture of several men and women wearing yukata. It looks like it’s from a festival at a temple.

“It looks like Kamikawa shrine, based off the streets behind the food stalls. That means it was between July 20th and July 22nd,” Sakurako-san says.

Akiko’s step mother says, “this one is her,” while pointing to the picture. She’s pointing to a woman wearing a white yukata with a purple pattern, and a happy smile. “She was a moody girl,” she mumbles while we look over the photo. “She wasn’t mean or anything, just sort of shy and dainty… She was a bit awkward. Apparently she didn’t get along very well with her classmates in high school.”

She opens the album. There’s a picture of Akiko-san when she was in middle school or high school, looking rather tense.

“I wonder if it’s because she wasn’t very close with her parents. When she was in middle school, she started cutting her wrists and taking sleeping pills.”

When Akiko-san was in her third year of middle school, right around exam season, her mother and stepmother got into a big argument. Apparently she kept leaving the house to meet with men at night, leaving Akiko-san to take care of all the housework alone. Akiko-san’s father

had an old-fashioned mindset, so he thought she only needed to get a husband with a good job, and be good at housework. That only added to her struggles. She even gave up on going to university.

"My husband was always worried about his family, and he knew that Akiko was having a hard time. Yet… He didn't help her."

Apparently she didn't like the fact that her father was getting remarried to her new stepmother, either. She described her stepmother as an intruder in her family, who was only disturbing it.

"She started to ignore my husband and I, even though we lived together. Even when I made food for her, she'd say that she didn't want anything I touched. She would become unstable at times, and destroy things… My husband and I never knew how to treat her anymore. She eventually started working, left home, and got new friends and a boyfriend. My husband and I were relieved because it seemed like she was starting to get better."

She lets out a deep, deep sigh.Despite how uncomfortably warm the room is, her face looks pale.

"I think something might have suddenly gone wrong. Things weren't going well with her friends or boyfriend… Then one day, I got a message from her work saying she hadn't gone in for her shift. I rushed to her apartment, but she wasn't there."

It sounds like it's hard for her to talk about. I want to tell her she doesn't have to say anything if it's too hard… but Sakurako-san puts her index finger to her lips, telling me to stay silent.

"Instead, I found her will on her desk. However, it was all for her friends. She left nothing for my husband and I. It seems she sent some people long emails." Her voice starts to tremble. "It seems like she thought it would be better to talk to people on the internet about things like suicide, rather than talk to me. Even so, she had started to seem more mature in various ways… I thought maybe she would forgive me."

With that, the teardrops that have been floating in her eyes begin to spill onto her beige, floral pattern skirt. She clenches the back of her hand.

"It looked like she had made a promise with someone to commit suicide together. I found that out later when I looked through the messages on her phone and computer. Only her body was found, though. She burned charcoal, then hanged herself alone… I feel betrayed."

With no further words to say, she covers her mouth with her hands and begins to sob. She's desperately trying to control her tears and sadness. All it does is induce more sorrow. The corners of my eyes feel hot.

"Where are the emails?"

"Huh?"

"Do you still have the emails?" Sakurako-san quietly asks Akiko-san's stepmother. She sounds so cold hearted. "What do you know about the person she promised to commit suicide with?"

"N… Nothing, really. It was from a burner email address, but I think the emails are still there. I've left her smartphone as it is."

"I would appreciate it if you would let me take a look at them."

"S-sure…"

She does her best to compose herself before handing over the phone. It really doesn't feel right to be snooping through someone else's phone. I silently lean back, and sip my bitter coffee little by little. I feel sweat forming on my forehead. I wish I could turn down the heat.

Eventually, Sakurako-san shows me an email. It says that she was suffering, but she was too scared to go through with suicide on her own. One message only said "I want to die." The subject line starts with "Re:" several times, then ends with "me too." They must have gone back and forth several times. The sender is named Masahiro.

"Ma… Masahiro?" My heart beats hard in surprise. At that moment, my blood runs cold and I get goosebumps all over my body. "T-that's…"

Sakurako-san nods at me, and tells me to return the phone to the stepmom.

"...Do you think it's my fault?" She asks as I hand it over.

"Everyone says that I didn't do anything wrong. I'm sure everyone thinks her cutting was my fault, too… Even my husband. Since I remarried him, that girl became depressed… Don't you think so, too? Did she die because I tried to become her mother?"

"T-that's not true at all?"

"I wonder about that."

She drops the phone to the floor and curls up into a ball. Her face is pale, with a blank expression. A chill runs up my spine. It's like she's been possessed by something. Her gaze is out of focus, like she isn't looking at anything at all.

"Well, there's one thing I can tell you. You can't just stay in this dark room and wait for a voice that'll never come."

"Huh?"

"What you need is another human being who can support you, someone who you can share memories of your daughter with." Sakurako-san picks up the phone and hands it to her. "If your husband won't suffice, find someone else. Even if they don't understand your grief, finding someone who'll hear you out, like a councillor, will do. Create an environment for yourself that'll help you. You're not trying to atone for it, this is just self-satisfaction."

"But I…"

"You can't live with it - is that it? Trying to atone for your sins without achieving anything… your late daughter wouldn't want that. That's just an illusion. She's just a mass of carbon, sleeping under a grave. Of course, you could always play the part of a kind, suffering stepmother. If that's what you want to do, you'd better commit to it."

For a moment, the stepmother looks shocked. She almost looked angry. No, is it anger? At least, her sadness doesn't seem like a mere act.

"You can't stay like this. Don't let yourself become obsessed with your daughter's death. You don't have to let it get in the way of the rest of your life. If you don't like it, you can run away. It could be due to the effects of menopause, but you're losing function in your autonomic nervous system. Your thermoregulation functions don't seem to be working properly. This room is way too warm." Sakurako-san looks around the living room, and takes a deep breath. "Your daughter's life is not your life."

"..."

Akiko-san's stepmother softly places her hand on her chest, and nervously lowers her head.

“...About 2 weeks before she committed suicide, we went shopping together.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Yes. Just us. We went to the boutique and picked out things that looked good, or things that looked old… She not only picked out clothes for herself, but also for me… She told me that I’m still young, so I should wear nicer clothes,” he says, stroking her hair. It’s just a simple style, tied at the back, but it looks nice. “After that, I thought things were going smoothly between us… and yet…”

She takes a breath. “I thought that maybe she didn’t really want to die, after all. I thought maybe it was her way of venting when things were tough… It’s all my fault. I wish I could have been a more courageous mother, rather than being afraid of that girl,” she says, and looks at Sakurako-san. “My daughter’s life really is my life, after all. Don’t you think? It’s over. The end of a family member’s life ends the lives of those left behind. I’ll never be revived.”

“But th-“

Sakurako-san grabs Akiko-san’s stepmother’s shoulder, turns her face up, and stares straight into her eyes.

“You have to live. I’m not saying it’s evil to choose death - however. Now someone else will have to experience the same pain you did. There are people who cherish you.”

“The same… pain?”

“Ah, that’s right. Giving someone else that pain; that’s what I think is evil.”

It’s after 3pm by the time we leave the house.

“She’s a nice teacher.”

“Huh?”

The stepmother says softly, while she looks at Sakurako-san. She didn’t introduce herself as such, but I guess the stepmother thought Sakurako-san is a teacher who’s helping me.

“You must be happy… To be her student.”

“...Yeah. I think so, too.”

She may not be a school teacher, but she’s taught me countless things since I met her. It’s definitely not a mistake to call her my teacher. I respond with a smile.

When we get back to the car, Sakurako-san grabs the steering wheel with her usual stoic expression. Apparently she noticed my staring, and asks me, “what’s wrong?” with a smile when we get to a red light. It’s a gentle smile. She looks happy, but I wonder if that smile is really intended for me, or if it’s directed at Soutarou-kun. I feel a dull ache in my chest.

“Do you think this was really the work of Masahiro’s ghost?” I ask.

Sakurako-san laughs loudly. “A ghost, really?”

Well, I don’t really believe in occultic stories like that, either. I just think it’s fun to think about them like they’re real.

“Well, I’m not going to say anything unreasonable like ‘everything in this world has a scientific explanation.’ But dead people can’t send emails. Someone living has to have sent the email.”

“So do you think it has anything to do with the ghost in Kannondai?”

“I don’t know. Well, we’re not far from there. Let’s drop by,” Sakurako-san says.

The night viewing spot near Kannondai isn't far from the residential area we're at. Since it's snowy, and it's getting late, the world is all grey. Unfortunately, we can't see the townscape. We pass through the winding road, past the abandoned hotel that's said to be haunted, and eventually arrive near the graveyard. The large trees around the old house creak as they sway in the wind. There's a sign saying not to drive in the area at night, to prevent noise pollution. We come up to the cemetery, which has a large statue.

"...Ready to walk for a bit?" Sakurako-san asks.

We decide to drive around a little more, then walk to the entrance of the cemetery. It seems like the snow was recently plowed, but since it's been snowing constantly still, the snow is ankle deep. It's hard to walk, so I hold out my gloved hand to Sakurako-san. She looks a bit surprised, and raises her eyebrow before smiling and taking my hand.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking about how you're still just a child even though you're pretending to be a gentleman."

What's that supposed to mean? I sulk while I make us a path through the snow as we head toward the cemetery. It's huge.

The raging wind is so cold against my cheeks. Immediately my ears and cheeks are so cold that they hurt. I pull my knit cap down over my eyes. Sakurako-san doesn't have a hat, she must be even colder. To make matters worse, she doesn't even have gloves on. The nitrile gloves she carries with her offer no protection against the cold. I take off one of my gloves and offer it to her. I invite her to put her other hand in my coat pocket. Sakurako-san's hands are big, but very cold.

"It's cold, huh?" I ask.

"Yeah… and quiet."

It's a cemetery in winter. There aren't many people who would come here.

"We should have brought Hector with us."

"We wouldn't have been able to get him back."

I force a smile. Sakurako-san squints. If he went out into this blank white world, he'd blend right in and we wouldn't be able to find him. Sakurako-san is wearing a white down coat, so I hold her hand tightly so I won't lose sight of her. Her hand moves a bit in my pocket, but she doesn't take it away.

In the end, we don't even know what we're looking for. It's just a short walk through a cold cemetery. We don't even know where Akiko-san hanged herself. Why would she do that here? In any case, I can't help but think how lonely it would be to die alone here.

Part 5

At school on Monday, I tell Kougami and Ootsu about what happened on Saturday. Ootsu looks like she's in a bad mood. A bowl cut, thick glasses, a bulky frame, a へ shaped mouth… Ootsu is Endou's childhood friend, but they have completely different appearances. I feel like I have an idea of why they don't hang out together anymore.

“So this woman’s suicide might be connected to the urban legend?”

“I don’t know for sure, but it seems likely.”

“I really want to know who this ‘friend of a friend’ is. We have to find the person who submitted the story! If it had something to do with the person you told us about, then why is the story so different…? And is it really Masahiro’s ghost that’s killing people?!”

I’m surprised by how intense she is. I already did so much research.

“Anyway, I’d like you two to find out who sent it in. I really want to look into this a little more. Please!”

Kougami looks like she isn’t feeling very well after Ootsu’s oppressive speech. Kougami praises her a little bit, then shoots me an apologetic glance and turns to face Ootsu.

“...Ayako is worried about you. She wants you to stop looking into these creepy stories.”

“Ayako does? Well, she was always a coward, after all.” Ootsu looks displeased. “Besides, if she was really worried, she’d have told me herself.”

“Hitomi…” Kougami’s expression becomes cloudy.

“I already know that Ayako hates me. Her boyfriend is more important than me.”

“But… I’m sure… She was trying her best to say it to you directly, but she was scared she might hurt your feelings. And to say she hates you…”

“It’s fine! I already know! Stop talking about her! I get it already! I know that she’s avoiding me!”

Kougami looks like she’s trying to find the right thing to say, but Ootsu has already covered her ears, and is drowning everything else out with her shouting.

“Anyway, I have work to do for the broadcasting club right now. I’m really doing my best for this segment. I don’t have time to be worrying about Ayako. Please, Yuriko, will you help me figure out this urban legend?”

Ootsu glances at me. Kougami pulls on my arm.

“Yeah, of course. You can count on us.”

“Thanks, I will,” Ootsu says, sounding relieved. Kougami clenches my sleeve tighter until Ootsu disappears into the broadcasting club room.

“...She’s always been touchy, but recently… since she’s been more involved with the broadcasting club… I think she’s been frustrated with Ayako more often,” Kougami explains to me. “Ayako and Hitomi have always been so close that it made me a little envious, but I feel bad for Hitomi now that she's suddenly alone.”

Kougami holds her chest like it hurts, and speaks with such a sad voice. I feel like I’m starting to understand why she wants to solve this mystery so bad. I think she really wants to help her friends.

“Alright. I’ll keep helping out.”

Kougami seems to have noticed that I don’t have a very good impression of Ootsu. She seems a bit surprised at my answer, then smiles.

“Thank you, Tatewaki-kun.”

It’d be more correct to say I’m doing this for Kougami, rather than Ootsu. I’ve been wanting something to concentrate on, anyway. That way I won’t have to worry about everything else.

“Then, today let’s go talk to the senpai about it.”

With that, Kougami and I split up and head for the floor where the older students' classes are. I don't know many of the second and third year students. Even so, Miyata-senpai, a second year, is the easiest to call out to. He attends my grandpa's judo classes in Nagayama. He was my sparring partner when I visited 2 weeks ago.

Since leaving the hospital, I've been learning self defence at my grandpa's dojo while keeping an eye on my physical condition. I don't want to get hurt like that again.

"What's up?" Miyata-senpai has a solid judo build. He returns my greeting and smiles when I visit his classroom. He has a tough body and square face, but his eyes and smile look innocent, like a puppy.

"Senpai, I have something I want to ask you about."

I tell him about the urban legend. I thought for sure he wouldn't know about it, but he replies with "oh, I've heard of that."

"R-really?! Who did you hear it from?! Did you submit it?!"

"Well, I only just heard it this morning. See, over there," he says, pointing to a girl. I greet her, and ask her the same thing.

"The person who told me was my sister. She heard it from a friend of a friend."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, she's in her first year."

"Huh?"

When I ask her more questions, I learn that her sister is in Kougami's class. Since we asked around her class on Friday, and I spoke to her then… That means the friend of a friend is me. After talking to Miyata-senpai, I talk to a few more people, who give me surprising reactions. Almost nobody had heard of it last week, but now it's spread all over the school. I search around for Kougami, and find that she's noticed the same thing. Since so many people have shared the story, it has started to change form, and has gotten mixed around.

"This is just making it harder and harder to find the original person," Kougami says, looking upset.

"It's no good, it's completely our fault for letting these rumours spread."

"Yeah, it sure is."

Well, we can't do anything about that now. We put up a poster on the school bulletin board saying that we're searching for the person who submitted the story.

"I wonder why they decided to stay anonymous in the first place."

That's true. I wonder if they wanted to save themself the trouble of people asking about it, or something like that. Whatever the reason is, they also might not contact Ootsu, even if they do look at the poster. I'm at a loss as to what we should do, so I just go home for now. That night, while I'm sitting in bed playing a puzzle game on my phone, I get a call from Sakurako-san.

"Did anything happen?"

"It was the same as usual. Did you find anything out about Hanabusa, Sakurako-san?"

"Unfortunately, I couldn't find anything connected to him… Speaking of which, did you find anything out about Kannondai?"

“It’s the same for me. Actually, things have just gotten even harder.” I can hear her laughing a bit when I tell her about how the “friend of a friend” turned out to be me. “It was a funny mistake. I never expected that to happen.” I force a small laugh. She snorts.

“Well… I’ll tell you one thing. There’s 3 different ways the term ‘friend of a friend’ can be used. They could have actually heard about it from a friend, aren’t sure about the source, or they’re trying to hide the fact that it was them.”

“Huh? Then… How are we supposed to know which one it is?!”

“Who knows. I don’t know for sure, but it could have been Girl A, or the person who originally made up the story.”

“Girl A…”

Now that I think about it, the story ends with Girl A getting a cursed email from Masahiro. In that case, what happened to Girl A after? If she died right then and there, the story would end and it wouldn’t go anywhere. Then, was there a third party at that place? Or Masahiro himself?

“Girl A… Akiko… Girl A died at Kannondai cemetery…” I mutter. What started off as a lighthearted search for the roots of an urban legend has suddenly started to feel much more sinister.

“Well, whatever. After school tomorrow, bring that girl called Hitomi to me.”

“Huh? Ootsu?”

“I’d rather talk to her directly. Meaning can get lost when stories are passed along. I want to hear a bit from Hitomi herself.”

“Got it.”

I tell Sakurako-san that as long as Ootsu doesn’t have something else going on I’ll take her to her house, then hang up the phone. I don’t feel like playing video games, but I don’t feel like turning off the lights and going to sleep either, so I turn on the TV. There’s a special on called “Midwinter Scary Video Report”. I know I shouldn’t be, I’m so scared tonight that I can’t bring myself to turn off the TV or lights. My mom scolds me the next morning when she has to turn them off.

Part 6

The next day, I bring Ootsu to Sakurako-san’s place after school. Kougami readily agreed to it, but I feel reluctant. I’m fine since I’m used to it, but it’s always hard bringing people into that bone-filled room. When I spoke to Ootsu first thing in the morning, she looked suspicious and asked, “why should I go?” In the end, it was up to Kougami to convince her.

Kougami can be unexpectedly stubborn. Once she decides on something, she doesn’t relent. It’s because of that trait that I meet up with both of them after school. At first glance, it would appear that I’m leaving school with two girls, but in reality they leave me out of their conversation, so I’m basically alone.

The story has completely spread through the school. You could probably ask anyone at his point, and they’d recognize it.

“Even though we put up that poster… Nobody contacted you, right?”

“Nope.” Ootsu sighs in response to Kougami’s question.

Kougami and Ootsu stay silent for a while, until Kougami speaks again.

“Hey… Did you know Akiko?”

“Huh?”

“When we mentioned her, you were shaking, and you looked really angry. It… It wasn’t a normal reaction.”

“What are you saying?!”

Everyone in the bus falls silent for a moment in response to Ootsu’s outburst. All eyes gather on us.

“I had absolutely no relation to her,” Ootsu says, keeping her voice down this time.

“Then why? Why did you react like that?”

“You’re asking why…? It’s because I hate those kinds of stories.”

“Is that so? But you were so addicted to those ghost hunting games before.”

“That’s just a game. It’s not a true story, okay?!”

“What if... What if Endou sent in the story? But then that would be the reason to hide her identity?”

Just like that, Kougami and Ootsu get into a light argument. I decide to step in and help.

“The reason… I see”

Kougami gives a downhearted nod. I can’t think of a reason. However, if Ayako Endou were the source of the story, she could have just told Ootsu. She didn’t have to do it anonymously. I can’t think of any advantages staying anonymous would have. Maybe Endou knew Akiko.

I notice that Kougami has become increasingly uncomfortable. I think about it while I watch the two of them in silence. In the end, I can’t think of anything. Oh well, when we talk to Sakurako-san, I’m sure we’ll figure something out.

When we get to the Kujo residence, gran is a bit surprised to see an unfamiliar face. However, the one who is most surprised is Ootsu. First of all, she’s surprised by the size of the house. Also by the large dog greeting us, Hector. Since Ootsu isn’t good with dogs, Hector unfortunately has to be put in gran’s room. As a child, she got bit by a dog in her neighbourhood, so she’s been scared ever since. Of course, the most surprising part is the living room. Bones, bones, bones… Every single surface is decorated by pure white animals. Ootsu is at a loss for words, and tenses up.

“I was surprised at first, but… I’m fine. At least a skeleton can’t bite.”

Kougami smiles gently. That same smile is probably what convinced Ootsu to come here in the first place.

“Y-yeah…” She nods, and timidly sits down on the sofa.

Sakurako-san sits down in her usual chair. She smiles calmly, and says, “I’m glad you came.”

Gran is excited to have a new guest. She’s already getting tea ready. Kougami brought some delicious looking macarons to go with the tea. When Kougami told me over the phone, “I bought something for us to all eat together,” I could tell how considerate she was being.

Gran says, “thank you so much for the wonderful gift…” and brings us warm apple and sweet potato umani. The scent of raisins, the crunch of the apple, and the flaky sweet potatoes

are all superb. Gran tells us about the snacks, but Sakurako-san seems like she wants to get right down to business.

"Let's get started…" Sure enough, as soon as gran leaves the room, Sakurako-san starts talking. "The girl called Hitomi Ootsu. What made you choose this story among all the other ones?" Sakurako-san asks, while Ootsu nervously sips her tea. Ootsu looks sort of surprised.

"Huh? W-well… It's because I didn't know this story…"

"I've done some research of my own, but there are countless similar stories all over Japan. What I'm saying is… This story is very generic. That's why I'd like to hear why you chose this story."

"Of course the reason is because it takes place in Asahikawa," Ootsu answers like it's a foolish question to ask. It does seem like a weird question to ask.

"I see. The key points to this story are: 1. It's set in a nearby location (Asahikawa). 2. It takes place on a clearly set date. 3. Girl A's name is kept anonymous, while Masahiro's name isn't. 4. It involves mysterious use of a cell phone. Those are probably the parts that attract everyone's attention. I can't say it seems very realistic," Sakurako-san says, and leans back in her chair with her fingers tented. She looks at Ootsu.

"Why is it "July 25th", "Kannondai", and "Masahiro"? Can't it be any other date, place, and name?"

"That's… How could I know that?" Ootsu asks. She looks daunted by Sakurako-san.

"You didn't question it? The first thing I want to know is the reason for the specific and regional parts." Sakurako-san smiles. However, unlike her usual innocent smile, this one looks somehow malicious.

"I just want to know where the story came from and who spread it. Besides, you don't have to investigate it."

"Why? Is there some reason I shouldn't?" When Sakurako-san presses her for an answer, Ootsu looks at me for help.

"Um… Sakurako-san… You're kinda…" I find it hard to bring myself to call out to her.

"What?"

"If you talk so forcefully, you'll scare Ootsu."

"I see, my bad. However, there are some strange points that I'm not satisfied with." Sakurako-san snorts as if saying she's still waiting for an answer to urge Ootsu to talk. Ootsu still doesn't seem like she wants to answer. When she realizes Kougami and I are staring at her, she lets out a small sigh.

"Then… Let's stop the discussion here. I'll… investigate it on my own." Ootsu replies clearly and bitterly.

"Hitomi…?" Kougami says, puzzled by her attitude.

"I'm leaving," Ootsu says frankly. She fidgets and looks toward the door. Sakurako-san starts laughing loudly.

"Well, wait. This discussion isn't over. Anyway, I don't know what you want. Even though you asked Yuriko and boy to investigate it, you don't seem to be making the most of their help," Sakurako-san says before taking a sip of tea. She's waiting for Ootsu to reply. However, Ootsu just turns away from us, and stays silent.

“It’s strange, isn’t it? Apparently you did some research about this before asking these two to help. If that’s the case, then why did the story only spread now? It spread all over the school after these two investigated for just a couple of days, so why is it so different from when you looked into it?”

“That’s… That’s because I told people not to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“There wouldn’t be a point in me talking about it over the broadcast if everyone already knew it, right?”

“Well, that would be a plausible answer if you’d asked these two to keep it quiet, too. The story is well known to everyone in the whole school now, it seems.” Sakurako-san’s tone of voice sounds malicious, like she’s toying around with Ootsu. However, Kougami and I kind of understand what she’s getting at.

“Sakurako-san…”

“Did I ever tell you, boy? The reason it was a ‘friend of a friend.’ The reason the contributor's name was kept anonymous. I wonder if the original contributor existed at all.”

Ootsu doesn’t even try to stop Sakurako-san’s merciless statements. She turns to me with a big grin and says,

“They didn’t exist? What do you mean? There’s no way…”

“Ah, you understand. Or am I wrong?” After talking to me, Sakurako-san turns to Ootsu. She makes sure she can see Kougami and I, too.

“W-what?” Ootsu asks, trembling.

“It’s you. You’re the one who made the story, the anonymous contributor, and the ‘friend of a friend,’ aren’t you?”

“...”

The room goes silent. For a while, Ootsu doesn’t say anything- no, she can’t say anything.

“...Hitomi.” Kougami eventually runs out of patience, and puts her hand on Ootsu’s shoulder.

“Why…?” Ootsu says with a trembling voice as Sakurako-san continues to stare at her.

“Why did you make up the story? So you could broadcast it at the school? Is this urban legend like “Curious Development of a Discopherous Bone in the Stomach of a Duck” for you?”

Kougami and I look at each other upon hearing the unfamiliar English phrase. Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose at us.

“It’s Crabbe’s Practice. I thought you both said you liked Conan Doyle.” Sakurako-san looks at Kougami and I as if she’s shocked. She knows I like mystery novels. But Kougami? I was surprised for a moment, but now that I think about it, Sakurako-san has been in Kougami’s room. She must have seen the books on her shelves. I still have no idea what she’s talking about.

“...Well, I was basically asking if it was made up as a publicity stunt. You wanted to make up a new story that takes place nearby, then announce it to get attention, right?”

“You’re wrong!” With the same perplexed expression that Kougami and I have, Ootsu shouts her denial.

“In that case, tell us the reason. A reason that will satisfy us. You’ve been lying to us, after all.”

Ootsu looks like she’s about to cry. She shakes her head, and covers her face with her hands.

“You say I’m lying… In the end I just… Wanted to find them.”

“Find them?” I ask. Ootsu sighs, still covering her face.

“Girl A and Masahiro… I wanted to find them.”

“Girl A…? What do you mean, Hitomi?” Kougami asks this time. Ootsu lets out another long sigh.

“...Since you’ve heard the story, I’m sure you know that it’s about Girl A and Masahiro. Well, it’s mostly about Girl A**.** I was hoping the people themselves would recognize it. Aki-chan and Masahiro-kun, that is.”

I still don’t fully understand what she’s saying. Ootsu looks at us with a worried expression while she wonders what else to say.

“Keep going.” Sakurako-san urges her.

“...Then is it okay if this takes a while? I’ll start from the beginning.” After a short silence, Ootsu takes a deep breath. “It doesn’t matter what I try to do, I can’t sleep at night**.”**

Sakurako-san leans back in her chair with a smile, making the backrest creak.

On the evening of July 25th, both my parents were in Sapporo to attend a funeral. It was for a distant relative, so I decided to stay home instead. Actually, my older brother was supposed to be there, but he went to his girlfriend’s house. It was probably the first time in my life that I had been alone at night. I wasn’t sure why, but I felt so free being alone at night. I felt like I had to go out and do something special.

I could go to karaoke… My parents were strict, so I usually couldn’t do things like that. But going alone would be nerve wracking and boring, right? So I messaged Ayako. Ayako’s parents were pretty relaxed, so she could often go out at night, and sleep over at a friend’s house. As I expected, she replied immediately. Since it was a Friday night, it was fine.

After a bit of back and forth, we decide to meet up at the arcade in the mall. I headed straight there. Deep down, I knew that if she got invited to the festival at the shrine, she’d ditch me for that. Sure enough, when I got to the arcade, Ayako didn’t come, even an hour after the time we’d agreed on. I thought it was strange so I texted her, but she said that her boyfriend asked her to hang out so she went to his place. I was so upset, and didn’t know if she was trying to avoid me on purpose, or if she just couldn’t think about anything but her boyfriend.

It’d be a waste to just go home, so I tried to enjoy the noisy arcade. I was lonely and nervous being on my own. That’s when I met Aki. She knew me. She said we go to the same school. I didn’t recognize her, but I thought it was just because we were probably in different grades. However, Aki definitely knew me. When she said “you’re the girl from the broadcasting club, right?” It made me… happy. Very happy. I wasn’t lonely anymore. Aki invited me to play with her.

Normally I’m not the type of girl who gets along with everyone easily. Kind of a gyaru with a short skirt, lots of makeup, acting overly familiar… But that day, I didn’t mind that feeling

of closeness. It was the first time I'd walked while holding hands with someone I didn't know. Aki was alone that day, too. Her friend cancelled their plans last minute. It's like… we were feeling the same pain. I think that's one of the reasons I like Aki so much.

While we were talking about where to go next, a pair of boys approached us. It was my first time being approached by a playboy-type of guy. I was caught off guard, but Aki looked delighted. The two of them invited us to karaoke. Of course, since it was the first time I'd met them and it was getting late, I was opposed to going with them. However, Aki was eager to go. I didn't want her to go alone or betray her, so I decided to go with them, as well.

At first I was vigilant, but the two boys turned out to be fun and kind. One of the boys, Masahiro-kun, was delighted when he saw my cell phone strap. It was a character from a popular manga, so he told me about how he loves the series, too. Before long, the other boy and Aki hit it off really well.

I felt like I was really stepping outside of my comfort zone. It was my first time at karaoke, and my first time sitting with boys close enough that our knees were touching. Still, it was really fun, and the time passed by quickly. Eventually, after a few hours, I started to think I should head home, especially after the boys' middle aged acquaintances joined us. One man had a car, so he offered to take all of us home. He said he'd even take us on a bit of a drive.

As I expected, I didn't feel comfortable in the car of someone I didn't know… But I didn't want to offend someone the two boys introduced us to, and I didn't want to stay out any longer, so I went anyway. I got kind of a strange feeling from the man… It was kind of scary. He was probably around 30-40 years old. He had some wrinkles, yellow teeth, and smelled like cigarettes. Masahiro-kun called him "Mitsu-san."

Mitsu-san took us to Kannondai. It was a white car. Somehow, I ended up in the passenger seat. I really, really hated it. Aki was happily looking at the view, but I was struggling to talk to Mitsu-san. At some point, he parked the car by the cemetery. As soon as he smiled and looked at me, I knew I was right to be anxious. In an instant, he changed from using a soft tone of voice to slapping me across the face. It wasn't that hard, but it surprised me, and he was already looming over me.

I was always jealous of Ayako's feminine figure, but I was happy about my appearance for the first time. When I fought back with all my might, Mitsu-san's arm stopped for a moment. The boys in the back seat tried to hold me down, but since the seat was in the way, they couldn't reach very well. I managed to escape from the car.

One of the buttons on my blouse got torn off, but I kept running anyway, but I realized that I left Aki in the car. I heard her scream, "don't leave me here!" but I was so scared, I didn't want them to hit me again. I was scared, so scared that I couldn't stop running. I thought about going to find help, but I didn't know where to go, or what to do, so I just kept running straight. Just running away alone… There were people who were worried and tried to stop me along the way, but I ignored them. I didn't even think of calling a taxi, so I ended up walking all the way home.

It was early morning by the time I got home. I wanted to report it to the police, but I was scared my parents would find out I went out so late. It got even harder to call them once my brother came back. I tried to forget, but I just couldn't stop thinking about how I left Aki all alone.

I felt so guilty that it drove me crazy. She said we went to the same school, so I tried searching for her in the higher grades, but I couldn't find her. Aki definitely knew me. As time passed, all I could think about was my sin. It was driving me insane… so I thought that I had to do something. If I didn't, inside of me Aki would forever be stuck in that place.

I'm the worst. I sacrificed Aki so I could get away. I know what it meant when they didn't chase me. No, even then, she saved me. So I have to find Aki. I have to make sure she's safe, and I have to apologize. I definitely have to apologize to Aki. I have to rescue Aki from the endless nightmares inside me.

"So, I decided to spread the urban legend. I wonder if Aki has heard it yet. Originally it was an urban legend called 'The White Sedan Kidnapping', and as Kujo-san said, it's a mediocre story template that only shines because it takes place in Asahikawa," Ootsu says in a disgusted voice. Her face becomes covered in tears. Kougami has Ootsu lean on her shoulder while she comforts her. Eventually, Ootsu swallows her sobs.

"I'm sorry, as Kujo-san said, I'm the one that made up the story. I asked Yuriko to do it because I didn't want to spread it directly and make people suspicious. I'm truly sorry."

"Hitomi…"

"I'm sorry… but I just couldn't tell the truth." With that, Ootsu runs out of endurance and clings to Kougami as she bursts into tears.

Part 7

It's a bit quiet in the car after we drop off Ootsu. The only sound filling the car is the singing of His Excellency, Diavel. He sings clearly at the top of his voice about how society can be both beautiful and dirty, kind and cruel, and bitter and cynical. Sometimes I wonder if Sakurako-san sees the world the same way as a demon would. At least, she sees the world through a different lens than me. I wonder if that's why she's always listening to him? No, it's probably just because she likes it.

I look over to Sakurako-san. She's expressionless, as usual.

"...I'm sorry." Kougami suddenly apologizes from the back seat.

"For what?"

"Lots of things… I'm sorry to both of you." She looks truly apologetic.

"It's fine, it's not your fault… We don't mind, right?" I say, looking to Sakurako-san again. I hoped that she would tell Kougami not to worry about it or something, but she looks almost like she's in a different place right now.

"Um… What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It just didn't feel right."

"Pardon?"

"Something still doesn't feel right. It's like the bones of this story are dislocated."

"Dislocated…"

Kougami and I look at each other. I can understand how Sakurako-san feels. It's concerning. The fact that "Aki" might have been sacrificed for Ootsu's sake. Could the "Aki" that Ootsu talked about be the same person as Akiko Muratsubaki? I'm sure that's what Sakurako-san is thinking. In the picture we saw of Akiko, she looked young, like a high school student. She didn't seem like the gyaru type, but she did have light brown hair.

"Let's see… For now, let's go talk to that Ayako girl."

"Huh? Endou?"

Kougami says, "Oh…" with a nod. "I think she's at a futsal match today. She should be at the civic centre gym. She invited me to go, but I said I was busy…"

"That's perfect. Let's go," Sakurako-san says, flicking on the car's blinker.

The civic centre is pretty far from here. By the time we get there, people are already heading home after the game.

"They're leaving…"

Moments after she starts scanning the crowds, Kougami shouts, "Ayako!" Following her line of sight, I soon see Endou. Her hair is up in a ponytail, and she's giving off a more boyish feeling than usual.

"Yuri! I'm so glad! You made it!" When she notices Kougami, Endou rushes over and gives her a hug.

"There was a festival in the evening at Kamikawa shrine. Why didn't you go?" Sakurako-san suddenly asks Endou without even so much as a greeting.

"Huh? Um…"

"Why didn't you go?"

"What?"

"Didn't you make a promise with that girl called Hitomi?"

"That's… Something urgent came up…"

At first she was taken aback by Sakurako-san suddenly appearing, but now that she seems to have registered what's being asked, her expression clouds.

"If something comes up, you should contact the person immediately. Nowadays, with cellphones and the like, it's easy enough to contact someone quickly in a number of ways. Furthermore, aren't you close enough with Hitomi to not need to be reserved about refusing something like that?"

Rather than answering the questions, Endou's mouth takes on a distorted shape. It's unpleasant.

"You really couldn't even say a single word to her? Why didn't you contact her? That Hitomi girl contacted you herself. Twice. Even I could feel your spite there. Not meeting somewhere you promised to with your former best friend, and refusing to contact them? That's nothing if not spite."

Endou stays silent. After sitting in silence for a few moments, she finally exhales.

"Yeah… you're not wrong. As you said, I had no intention of going from the start."

"Why?!" Kougami shouts, surprised.

"Recently, talking to Hitomi has made me irritated, so I had no choice. Especially since I have a boyfriend, she's so gloomy that she just gets in the way, so there's no helping it! Always just talking about games and manga… honestly, it's so embarrassing that I just wanted to get rid

of her already," Endou spits out. Her malice is clearly directed to Ootsu herself. "Hitomi says I've changed, and I'm acting weird. But… Hitomi is the weird one. We're not in elementary or middle school anymore, liking someone isn't a bad thing, right?"

"So why did you flake out on Hitomi?"

"...At first, I just wanted her to realize that I don't like her like I used to, and I don't want to hang out anymore." Endou bites her lip. "The day after the festival, Hitomi was super angry with me for not going. She complained that I'd never do something like that if I didn't have a boyfriend. She said in class that I break promises and cancel at the last minute, too."

"...Yeah, I heard that." Kougami sighs and nods.

"We heard the story about your fight from both sides, and it sounded like she was just upset because you broke your promise. A simple 'sorry, I can't make it,' would have made things turn out better, right?"

It's Kougami who responds. Endou raises the left corner of her mouth into a cynical grin.

"I just did the first thing that popped into my head." Endou doesn't even try to hide her anger.

She's starting to make me angry.

"So on the 25th, when Hitomi contacted me, I suddenly got a great idea. I decided to scare her a little."

"Huh?"

"I called one of my friends from futsal. I asked her to take Hitomi to the arcade, get close to her… Then make her suffer a little bit."

"...No way…"

A chill runs up my spine as I listen to Endou's hate filled voice. Kougami and Sakurako-san exchange horrified glances. Kougami is covering her mouth with her hand in disbelief. Sakurako-san's eyebrows are deeply furrowed.

"You did that just on a whim?! You couldn't have actually asked her to do something that terrible, right?!"

"Letting Hitomi almost get assaulted by a man in Kannondai?! In the end, she got slapped across the face, escaped from the car, and walked the rest of the way home…"

"Really?! ...I just asked her to take her to karaoke and surprise her a bit. I never asked for her to be taken to Kannondai or treated like that!" Endou refutes, confused. When she sees how serious our expressions are, she realizes it's true. "Really…? I asked Masahiro-kun and the others, but I didn't hear about that…"

Her face turns pale. She must be imagining what would have happened if Ootsu hadn't escaped that night. At least, her surprised expression doesn't look like she's faking it.

"I understand. It seems like you're telling the truth. Fortunately, the worst outcome has been avoided, however, Hitomi still feels guilty."

"Why?"

"She left the other girl behind when she ran away."

It's silent for a moment. But soon, Endou nods.

"Is it about Aki? Well… she's fine. She's Yuusuke's girlfriend, one of the boys that was there. She was also in on it. She came to the match today, and I think she seemed normal?"

"Huh? Really?"

With surprise, we all let out a relieved sigh.

“Yeah. If you’re worried, want me to give you her contact info? If you want to talk to Masahiro-kun directly, I think he works at a nearby second hand store? Oh yeah, did you see the match? Did you see the shot I made at the end? Aki was the one who passed it to me! Right, right, that was a good match, wasn’t it?”

After being caught up in such a dangerous situation, is Aki really unharmed? Ayako’s talking in such a cheerful voice that it sounds like she’s forgotten about how guilty Hitomi feels. It seems her futsal game is more important to her than putting her close friends in a dangerous situation with a prank. As she absent mindedly begins to talk about how she played an active role in today’s match, Kougami starts to get irritated. She listened with her arms folded. I feel extremely sick.

Kougami interrupts Endou’s tale of heroism and says, “then, is it okay to tell all this to Hitomi? She’s really worried about Aki-san.”

“Huh…? Did I… say something bad? Hitomi is still kind of my friend… so I regret going too far… I’d like you to keep it a secret if possible…” Endou starts to trail off then nods.

“I’m going to tell Hitomi everything. Otherwise, I’d feel bad about it,” Kougami says clearly. I feel the same way.

Endou pouts in dissatisfaction, but before long, she lets out a small sigh and nods, saying “you’re right, this is a good opportunity. Then… Here, this is a picture taken with everyone. You can see that they’re all fine, right?” Endou says, showing us her phone.

She sends it to Kougami. Endou points out which people are Aki and Masahiro, then suddenly gets a call. It’s from her boyfriend. She immediately starts talking and laughing happily. It pushes Kougami’s anger over the edge.

“Ayako?!” she suddenly yells.

Endou turns her back to us, like Kougami is just being a nuisance. Even in a situation like this, she’d rather be with her boyfriend than her friend. Though the person who has been quiet this whole time seems to be the angriest about her. Sakurako-san takes the phone out of Endou’s hands, hangs up, then gives it back.

“What was that for?!”

“You may be able to speak Japanese, but try opening a dictionary once in a while. Look up the meaning of ‘friend.’ I’m sure it won’t say ‘a plaything to use at your own convenience’ - Though, I’m sure it’ll come back to bite you. I’d be careful while out at night alone. You seem to have a lot of ‘friends’,” Sakurako-san says, leaning in close to Endou’s ear. She signals for us to go back to the car. Sakurako-san looks back at Endou with a mischievous smile.

Part 8

Kougami still seems upset with Ayako, even after we get in the car. I’m worried about her, so I decide to sit next to her in the back, rather than the passenger seat. Kougami phones Ootsu right away. She says that her determination will waver if she waits. It’s something she doesn’t want to do, but nobody else can.

At least amongst all the bad news, Aki is safe. For Ootsu, it must be a huge shock. I can hear her voice trembling. Still, it's good news for Sakurako-san and I, since Aki is safe. I'm glad that "Aki" didn't commit suicide in Kannondai because of Ootsu (or maybe I should say because of Endou). But it doesn't change the fact that Muratsubaki-san is dead.

"..." After ending the call, Kougami silently stares out the window.

I soon realize that she sounds like she's trying not to sob. Her cheeks are wet with tears. She starts to loudly cry out. It makes my chest hurt. I'm a little worried about whether I should pretend not to notice or not. However, when I look at her, our eyes meet through the reflection in the window.

"...Does everyone change when they get into a relationship?"

"That's… I think it's different for different people."

I pull a slightly wrinkled handkerchief out of my pocket. I don't know where I got it, but I offer it to Kougami. She gently refuses, saying, "you keep it, I'm fine." She stares at the back of Sakurako-san's head in front of her.

"...Sakurako-san is always the same, even in front of Ariwara-san," Kougami suddenly says, and smiles. It's true, Sakurako-san is the same as usual in front of Ariwara-san.

"I have a long history with Naoe. We know each other well. In particular, Naoe knows the right distance to keep so we don't hurt each other."

Sakurako-san and Ariwara-san definitely don't look like they're taking advantage of each other. The two of them seem to have a very mature sense of distance, and acknowledge the good parts about each other. It's proof of the time they've spent cultivating their relationship, to the point that they're engaged.

"Sakurako-san, do you… like Ariwara-san?" Kougami timidly asks.

"I don't know. However, when I die, the one I want to pick up my bones is Naoe, and no one else."

Kougami seems like she's having trouble understanding Sakurako-san's response. I look at her with a bitter smile. However, I get it. For Sakurako-san, that's probably the highest level of honour she can give.

"Then how is that different from just saying you like him?" Kougami asks Sakurako-san for an answer she can better understand.

I want to believe that within Sakurako-san, gentle words such as "love" exist. I want to believe that there aren't only men and women like Endou in this world. However, Sakurako-san seems troubled.

"Then… between bones and Ariwara-san, which do you like better?"

"Bones, of course. If they were Naoe's bones, that would be perfect." She responds immediately.

Kougami makes a sulky expression, and puts her head on my shoulder. She's probably asking the wrong person.

"But, I guess you could say… I like the way Naoe's skin smells." Sakurako-san glances at Kougami's disappointed expression through the rear view mirror.

"His skin?" I repeat, before realizing the meaning of those words.

“It’s called the HLA (Human Leukocyte Antigen) system, and influences a person’s body odour and immune system. There’s a theory that women prefer the scent of a man with a different HLA. It leads to creating stronger offspring.”

Kougami definitely wanted a more emotional conversation. Since Sakurako-san is a realistic person, her answer wasn’t very romantic. For me, getting an answer like that from her can be frustrating. It’s basically just the bare minimum. Isn’t there something more to it, like love? I’ve been envious of Ariwara-san from the start. He’s someone Sakurako-san needs. I wonder if someday, I’ll be important to her like that.

After getting home, I get a call from Sakurako-san like usual. Ever since she got that letter from Hanabusa, she’s been calling me every day to make sure I’m safe. It’s mostly just a businesslike call to make sure everything is fine, but lately I’ve been using it as a chance to say goodnight to her.

Since I was just with her before, I didn’t expect her to call. Apparently she feels the same way. She says, “well, it’s sort of a habit now.” When she got home, Hector was laying around. He’s laying in front of the stove in the living room, curled up in a ball. Sakurako-san calls out to him, so he wags his tail and gives a big sigh. She asks me to play with him when I have some free time. Of course I will, since Hector is so cute. I tell her that I’ll visit after school tomorrow before ending the call.

Hector greets me at the entranceway with an excited dance. Ahh, dogs are so cute. It’s important, so I’ll say it one more time. Dogs are really, really cute. Maybe it’s because I’m still a kid, but I prefer how dogs show their feeling plainly over cats that always keep their distance. On the other hand, Sakurako-san has a hard time keeping up with how excitable he is.
After our greetings, I decide to take Hector on a walk to the small festival at a nearby park.

Looking at Hector makes all the anxiety and irritation in my chest immediately disappear. As he steps through the snow that fell earlier, he leaves nose prints in the snow. Seeing it fills me with joy. On the way home, he occasionally looks up at me as if he’s saying “it was fun, wasn’t it?” as he sticks out his tongue and smiles. I pet his head.

When I get back, gran is making caramel milk. Milk has a high butterfat content during the winter, so it’s rich and delicious. Seeing it ooze out is such a treat. While I have the milk and some jam sandwiches, I talk to Sakurako-san, who is thinking while sitting in her usual chair.

“Ootsu and Kougami wanted me to thank you for yesterday.”

“I see.”

Her reply seems somehow distracted. Maybe she isn’t interested.

According to Kougami, Ootsu and Endou won’t even look at each other at school. I was worried they might get into a fight, so I’m relieved. But Kougami says she feels the opposite, she’s sad about it. The fact that they won’t fight means this is the end of their relationship. I’ve heard that the opposite of love is indifference.

“By the way, the suspicious vehicle in front of the house was removed at some point.”

“Oh...”

Another noncommittal reply. It’s like my words aren’t reaching her ears.

“What happened? As a last resort, I ask her again.

“Nothing… I’m just not satisfied with something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about Akiko Muratsubaki. Her death hasn’t been tied in yet.”

“That’s… wasn’t that just a coincidence?”

I’m pretty sure that it was just a coincidence that she died in the same spot that the story mentioned. The date was similar, but that’s about it.

“A coincidence? Doesn’t it seem strange how similar they are?”

“But…”

In the world, there’s a mysterious phenomenon called a coincidence. Sakurako-san thinks to herself for a moment, then suddenly stands up, telling gran, “I’m heading out.”

“S-sakurako-san?!”

I quickly gulp down my milk, grab my sandwich, and chase after her. The milk is still hot, so I burn my tongue and throat. She still looks lost in thought, so I can’t ask where she’s going. It’s not like it’ll change, whether I know or not.

I eat my sandwich while she drives. After around 10 minutes, she stops the car. We’re at a second hand clothing store that I haven’t seen before. Why is she here? I’m confused at first, but I understand as soon as we enter the shop. It’s the place from the picture Endou showed us yesterday.

There’s a flashy-looking man playing with his phone at the counter. He looks like he’s around the same age as me. The shop smells a little musty, and there’s no other customers. There’s also some western music that I haven’t heard before playing. I learned much later that the song was called “The Hot Blood and Soul of Dracula.” It doesn’t look like he’s noticed us. He’s swaying to the music a bit, playing with his phone.

“Masahiro.”

“Yeah?” The man looks up at us.

We don’t know his last name, so we can’t help it. He seems suspicious of a stranger suddenly calling him by name.

“You’re an acquaintance of Ayako Endou. We’d like to talk to you for a bit.”

“Oh… If it’s about yesterday, Ayako already emailed me about it.” He grimaces, then lets out a sigh. “If it’s about Aki, you don’t need to worry. We both went home soon after that,” Masahiro-kun says, looking at his game rather than at us.

“I want to know about Akiko Muratsubaki.”

“Oh? Who’s that?”

“You don’t remember? She’s the woman that committed suicide a few days after Hitomi Ootsu was assaulted by your acquaintance in Kannondai. It was the same place, as well.”

“...Huh?” Suddenly, Masahiro-kun’s finger stops. “W… What about her?”

“Do you remember?”

“Ah… no…”

Masahiro-kun lifted his head from his phone, panicked, but lowered it again when Sakurako-san continues to question him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m in the middle of work. If you’re not a customer, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

It’s an unreasonable excuse, given that he’s slacking off and playing on his phone. Of course we aren’t going to leave because of that. Sakurako-san snorts and picks up a nearby

knit hat. The price tag says 4500 yen, but I don't really know what a fair price for it is. Sakurako-san takes out a 5000 yen bill, and violently slams it on the counter.

"I'll buy this, so let's talk about Akiko Muratsubaki."

Masahiro-kun bluntly clicks his tongue. "...Who did you hear it from, was it Mitsu-san?"

Sakurako-san shakes her head no.

"Then who was it?!"

"I didn't hear it from anyone. We researched it on our own. A woman died at around the same time and place, both with someone named Masahiro involved. Shouldn't that mean some suspicion is due?"

Of course both Masahiros are connected because of the urban legend Ootsu made up, but he wouldn't know that. He looks like he's realized that we know everything already, and he can't escape.

"I… I was asked to!"

"What?"

"I had nothing to do with the suicide! I was just supposed to invite her to the spot! It was just sort of a part time job! I had nothing to do with it!"

Masahiro tries to escape behind the counter, but his back hits the wall. He puts his hands together as if begging us for forgiveness. Since he's moving so much in the narrow space behind the counter, the business cards and goods fall off and scatter on the ground.

"A part time job? What do you mean?"

"It's exactly what I said it was! Lure out a woman online… Mitsuura-san pays thousands of yen!"

"Lure them out… you mean to murder them?" I say with a shaky voice as I take off the strangely prickly knit hat.

"That's not it! I don't know what Mitsu-san does to the girls, I'm completely unrelated. Even if they die, I'm not involved," Masahiro-kun says. "I found out later that Muratsubaki died, but she always said she wanted to die. She was really annoying to email. She was always saying she was lonely and didn't want to be a pain and stuff."

"Then you're okay with the fact that she died?"

"Yeah, she's free to do what she wants, right? Mitsuura-san and I are unrelated. A person died because they made plans to die. If a stupid woman wants to do something reckless, who's going to complain when something bad happens? You reap what you sow."

"That's…!"

It's all I can do to keep my anger from exploding as I listen to him. In my mind I can see Ootsu crying, and Akiko-san's stepmother floating by. Would he have been able to say that in front of the victims? A violent impulse runs through my body in an instant. Him thoughtlessly smiling while he explains makes me want to swing my fist down on the man in front of me.

"Stop it, Shoutarou."

However, Sakurako-san's calm voice stops me. My cheeks are flushed with anger. Taking a deep breath, I manage to swallow the impulse. I don't want to do anything uncool in front of Sakurako-san.

"You say you're unrelated, but you might be the only one who thinks so," Sakurako-san says while picking up the scattered papers at her feet.

“Huh?”

“The emails you exchanged are recorded on her cell phone. Even if you didn’t do anything directly, there’s still enough there to charge you with aiding a suicide. You could be sentenced to prison for anywhere from 6 months to 7 years. You say you’re a minor, but that’s only if you’re under 14. If you’re over 14, you’ll be treated as an adult.”

“S-sentenced… you mean I’ll be arrested?!”

“People have actually died. What are you surprised about? In addition, you tried to sexually assault Hitomi Ootsu, although it was just an attempt. Even that’s a crime.”

“But- but Ayako asked me to! I only did it for 20 thousand yen! What do you mean I could be arrested?!” Masahiro-kun’s voice is grating to listen to.

And he did all that for just 20 thousand yen? 20 thousand, just 20 thousand yen and he changed Muratsubaki-san’s life forever. I’m beyond angry, I’m on the verge of tears.

“If you don’t want us to immediately notify the police, tell us where this man called Mitsuura is.”

“Huh?”

“If you tell us where to find him, we’ll leave this place immediately.”

“R-really?” Masahiro-kun responds, in tears.

He doesn’t seem to realize that if “Mitsu” is arrested, the investigation will almost certainly find its way to him. He’s basically sacrificing himself by telling us where to find that man. I don’t feel right leaving the store like this. I wanted to do something more, like punish him somehow. In the end, I just can’t forgive him. It’s frustrating, but I follow Sakurako-san out of the store.

Part 9

Apparently Mitsuura lives near Sanroku (3-6). Sanroku is near a shopping centre, at 3-jodori and 6-chome. As the sun starts to set, the street is lit up by all the lights. The area around the station is surrounded by LED lights. It’s a really wintery scene. It’s all because the winter festival will be here soon. Even though it’s a weekday, it’s crowded by people looking at the lights.

Mitsuura’s place should be somewhere between 2-jodori and 3-jodori. After parking nearby, Sakurako-san suddenly puts her forehead against the steering wheel.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing… We should just leave this to the police, after all.”

“Huh?”

“We don’t need to be here.”

Why is she suddenly thinking like that? This person coaxed out a woman for just a few thousand yen and murdered her. What if the police don’t take it seriously? What if they say there’s nothing they can do unless they catch him in the act?!

“It’s okay. It’s not in their jurisdiction, but if we talk to Utsumi and Yamaji, they’ll help. At the very least, they’ll listen to us seriously. We’re ordinary citizens. It’s not our place to be exposing crimes and judging criminals.”

“But! At the very least we should try to get some hard evidence that he can’t get away from!”

“No, we can’t. From here on it’s police work. We shouldn’t stick our noses in this. We’ve done plenty.”

“But…”

I don’t understand why Sakurako-san came all this way just to say that. How can she just give up in a place like this?

“Good, bad… I don’t care about all that. It’s all subjective. Hitomi Ootsu’s problem was solved, and we were able to find out why Akiko Muratsubaki died. The story’s bones have been revealed, and everything has been tied up. I’m satisfied.”

“No way…”

I understand what she means, but it’s so, so frustrating that I can’t do anything. I don’t want to dress things up by saying “good” or “evil”, I just want to do the right thing. However, I’m angry with them, so I don’t want to leave it as it is. Just then, I get an email on my phone.

“Huh?” In an instant, my attention shifts to my phone. “Sakurako-san?”

“What?”

“Huh…? But…”

The ringtone was the one I have set for emails from Sakurako-san. Well, Sakurako-san when she’s going by Phantom.

”W-what does this mean?” I accidentally ask out loud. Sakurako-san looks at me, puzzled.

That’s right, it can’t be Sakurako-san. We’ve been in the car together the whole time, and Sakurako-san doesn’t have any kind of phone. She only sends emails from her computer.

“Th… then… Phantom is…?”

Suddenly, a chill runs up my spine. I feel dizzy. I always thought “Phantom” was Sakurako-san. We met over social media while I was in the hospital. Their extensive knowledge, kindness, and tone were all just like Sakurako-san, and they always wanted to know how my injury was doing. Once I started calling Sakurako-san in the evenings, we haven’t been talking much. They know about bones and the human body in detail, and can accurately analyze crimes…

“Phantom? What are you talking about?”

My vision goes dark for a moment. Just who is Phantom, then? Knows a lot about crimes, and is similar to Sakurako-san… No, I get the feeling that Phantom has known about Sakurako-san and I for a long time. With shaking hands, I pick up my phone. I tap the notification and open the email. The sender is definitely Phantom.

Boy, would you like a gift from me? The bodily fluids of that man are left in the car that Akiko Muratsubaki was in. That should be proof that the man was involved. However, he didn’t commit a murder. In the end, the only crimes he can be charged with are rape

and assisting a suicide. Sexual offenders have an illness that can't be cured. As soon as his sentence is over, he'll just commit the same crime again. Unless someone stops him, the same thing that happened to Akiko will happen again and again.

"...Huh?" My vision is black. "S-Sakurako-san, this…"

"What's wrong?"

I'm horrified. This whole time, I thought the person I was talking to was Sakurako-san. What have I told Phantom? How much have I said? How many important things that they shouldn't know? I hurriedly go back to all the emails and messages we've exchanged over social media. Another email arrives. The subject is addressed to Sakurako-san. When I show it to her, Sakurako-san turns pale.

To my beloved Snow Apollo.

Ask the man about the number on the car he was in 15 years ago. Do you still remember? The Cramer's 88 butterfly knows the rest of the numbers. Is there a backpack in your car today? You can rest easy. People are easier to dismantle than big deer.

"Boy! What the hell is this?! Why does Hanabusa know your email address?!"

"I-I don't know!"

A lie slips out in the heat of the moment. I don't know why I said that. My secret friend, my hospital friend, who hid themself from me. How can I tell her that I always thought I was talking to her, when it was really Hanabusa?

"Cramer's 88, a car number…" The moment she repeats that, Sakurako-san jumps out of the car.

"Huh?! W-wait, Sakurako-san!?"

I'm so bothered by Hanabusa's email that I struggle to climb out of the car. I don't have the key, so I don't know if it's okay for me to leave the car. But Sakurako-san keeps getting further and further away, disappearing into the crowd. Later on, I realized that I could have just used the manual lock, but at the time, I was completely confused.

Eventually, I chase after her. She's going up the steps to an old building. When I do any strenuous exercise, the spot where I got stabbed still hurts. Still, I can't stop running. I apologize to the person I bumped into when I reach the steps. I can hear the voice of an angry man yelling.

"Sakurako-san! Please wait! Please!"

I run up the stairs as fast as I can. We're heading to the third floor. Looking up, I can see and hear people talking with the door open. It sounds like an argument. Then I hear glass break.

"Sakurako-san?!" My voice comes out as a scream.

I can see Sakurako-san pointing a piece of broken glass at a man.

Part 10

Inside the store, there's only Sakurako-san and a single man. He looks like he's in his mid to late 30s. He's wearing a grey shirt, and black pants. He has a medium build, and doesn't have any remarkable traits. Honestly, he doesn't look like the kind of man to drive a woman to suicide. However, according to Sakurako-san, there's no mistaking it. He's Mitsuura.

"Y-you can't do this, Sakurako-san!"

Sakurako-san pushes the man against the wall, pointing the glass at his throat.

"I have something to ask you. You were in a white sedan 15 years ago. Tell me the number!"

"S-stop it!"

"I'm waiting! Tell me the number!"

The man screams. Sakurako-san puts all her strength into the glass.

"Stop, Sakurako-san! Put it down, it's dangerous!"

"I'm serious. I will stab you, right here and now. Tell me the number!" She demands.

"I can't remember a car from 15 years ago!"

"Then remember. It should be easy, since it was a life threatening situation."

"You're being absurd!" The man screams, his body soaked in sweat. He spits out a piece of mint gum he was chewing. He looks truly worried.

"...Was it 23-88?" After thinking a bit, the man speaks timidly.

"...Ah."

"S-so what if it is? Don't think I'm you for free!"

"I don't care if you call the police. You can do what you want. Let me make this clear, the number on the white sedan was 23-88?!"

"Yes, it was! It was 23-88! What do you want?!" The man finally gives in.

Sakurako-san takes a big breath, then looks like she's decided on something.

"S-sakurako-san. Please calm down. You absolutely can't do this."

"Of course I know that. That's why you should leave right now. This is my problem. I don't want you to get involved."

"I shouldn't get involved? What are you talking about!"

I hear Sakurako-san swallow her saliva. I know what she's about to do. I feel like it's obvious.

"Please help me!" Mitsuura starts to cry loudly.

"So you want help. Want to call the police? You can't call them. Don't tell me you've forgotten what happened 15 years ago? Beside, all this sweat, the smell of your breath… you're on drugs. Probably a stimulant."

"W-what are you talking about?!"

Blue blood vessels protrude on Sakurako-san's pale hands.

"You… you absolutely can't do this! If you do, you'll be just like that man. A criminal!"

"So what?" Sakurako-san says expressionlessly to my desperate attempt to stop her. Her voice is completely devoid of emotion.

“Eh…?”

She’s dangerous to be around. She’s not too different from Hanabusa. Isozaki-sensei’s words run through my mind. Even so, I can’t just leave. Someone has to stop her. No, not just someone. *I* have to stop her. Because I know that Sakurako-san is a kind person, even if our values are different.

“That’s enough, please put it down. Nobody is happy about this. If Soutarou-kun we’re here right now, he wouldn’t be pleased, and he'd say the same thing. He’d say ‘please stop, nee-san!’”

“...What?”

“15 years ago, a car… it must have been Soutarou-kun’s incident, right? If so, he wouldn’t be happy about this. He wouldn’t want you to kill someone because of him.”

Sakurako-san gasps. It’s like a quiet scream.

“If it were me, I absolutely wouldn’t be happy about it. Victims becoming perpetrators only increases the number of sad people. You should understand that. A bereaved family member will stay just that for their whole lifetime… you’re the one that taught me that, Sakurako-san. Besides, gran would be sad. You said that gran’s pain is your pain! Gran feels the same way. Your crime is gran’s crime. She would absolutely think that.”

I don’t know if my words reached Sakurako-san. However, I know she’s frightened for a moment. Right now, I want the power that comes with resembling Soutarou-kun, and being his replacement. No, rather, I wish I was Soutarou-kun. It’s fine if I’m just a replacement. As long as I can stop Sakurako-san. Even if she doesn’t call me “Shoutarou” for the rest of my life.

“So please stop, nee-san. I absolutely don’t want you to do something like this. You’re a ‘white bone’. Innocent, noble, stubborn, and someone who would never harm another person.”

I notice tears streaming down my cheeks. I don’t know whose tears they are, or why they’re coming out. They must be Soutarou-kun’s. Suddenly, Sakurako-san raises her glass shard.

“Eek!” Mitsuura trembles violently.

However, she pushes Mitsuura aside, and throws her glass onto the floor.

“Sakurako-san?!”

“Shoutarou, email Hanabusa. I’m not a butterfly, and I won’t be tricked or confused by his sweet words anymore.

“Huh…?”

“W-what the hell are you doing!” Mitsuura says, crying.

He’s sitting powerlessly with his back against the wall. There’s a puddle between his legs. He must have wet himself.

“It seems I made a small mistake. I should apologize to you - however, you have committed crimes that you have to answer for. Unfortunately, I’m not a keeper of the law. While I can’t judge you for your crimes, I can make a mark on your body… If you don’t want to feel how cold glass is against your skin, answer my questions properly.”

Sakurako-san smiles as she picks up a small piece of glass that was scattered on the floor. Mitsuura cries again, and shrinks back.

“Do you know the man called Hanabusa? He’s a painter. Did he call you a butterfly?”

“Hana…? What’s that?” Mitsuura asks.

It doesn't seem like he's lying, he sounds genuinely confused. Sakurako-san sighs. She loses interest in Mitsuura all at once. So, I decide to listen instead.

"...We heard the story from Masahiro-san. We know all about Kannondai. We know you met a woman named Akiko Muratsubaki, what did you do to her?"

"Masa… For Christ's sake!" Mitsuura slams his fist against the wall, his face red with anger. "...We had an agreement. The woman didn't resist. She didn't hate it, she just laid there like a dead fish… Well, that might have been the sleeping pills."

"Sleeping pills… What did you do to Akiko-san?!"

"Akiko-san? Was she your woman? Anyway, she was saying she wanted to die. She wanted to take some sleeping pills, then burn charcoal in her car. Of course, I didn't take any pills, so I got to do whatever I wanted while she slept." He speaks with desperation in his voice. He has a stiff smile on his face the whole time. "When I tried to ditch her at the park and go home, I hit a deer. It was a stolen car in the first place, so I left it at an abandoned house and called some friends to pick me up. When I said there was a woman asleep there, a bunch of them came to check it out, and someone took me back."

I don't know what happened after that, I completely lost my cool. I'm glad I didn't have a knife in my hand.

"What happened to Akiko-san…"

"I don't know! I heard later that she hung herself, but it's not like that was my fault. She wanted to die in the first place. It's not like I was asking all those other guys to come when I mentioned her sleeping. I had nothing to do with it!"

I don't know what I would have done to him if I couldn't control myself. I'm frightened by how hard it is to control myself. I take the duct tape that's holding the windows together and tape his hand, feet, and mouth up. After that, I run out of tape.

"The police will be the ones to decide if you 'had nothing to do with it.'"

"?!" Mitsuura tries to scream, but his mouth is covered.

"Let's go already. What you did was probably more than just self defence, Sakurako-san."

"...Are you going to report this?" Sakurako-san blinks in surprise.

"I'll message Utsumi-san. I'll tell him we're in trouble. He'll probably send out a police car right away… It'll be bad if we're here when they arrive."

"Let's get going," I say again, holding my hand out.

"...You're right."

Sakurako-san looks at my hand, but instead of taking it, she taps me on the head and walks past me.

Part 11

Fortunately, the car hasn't been stolen. That was really careless, but I'm glad I was able to stop Sakurako-san. As soon as I relax into my seat, I suddenly feel tired. After waiting for a few minutes, several police cars arrive. Since it's a red light district, there's probably several

drunk people wandering around. It's all up to the police now. I'll get the details from Utsumi-san another time. For now, we slowly start leaving.

"...Who told you about Soutarou?" Sakurako-san calmly asks from the driver's seat.

She doesn't have the car radio playing, so it's eerily quiet. I miss the sound of Diavel's singing right now.

"...I met with your uncle, Shitara-sensei, a while ago."

"I see… He must have been glad. He's always saying that he'd like to meet you." She gives a forced smile. "What did… you talk about?"

"He told me that you used to have a younger brother, and he would have turned 20 years old this year. He also said… That he died in an unforeseen accident as a child… And the case still hasn't been solved."

I take a short pause while I speak. That's truly all I know, but somehow I feel like I understand more after today.

"Was it a hit and run?"

She takes a deep breath before answering. "An unforeseen accident… That's a good phrase. True, it was an unexpected disaster. However, it wasn't a vehicle accident, or a hit and run. From the police's point of view, nobody else was involved in his death."

"Huh?"

"Soutarou suddenly disappeared when he was a child. He went missing."

"Where did he go missing?"

My heart is racing. The stab wound I got in Hakodate is starting to ache.

"Ah. He wanted me to go on a walk with him, but he got lost. We searched around town for 3 days, until a body was found at Nagayama shrine. In the pond… It was him. We always went for walks at Nagayama shrine. There was no way Soutarou could get lost."

"Then, what about the car?"

"While Soutarou was missing, I saw a strange, white sedan driving away near the house. I was only able to read '23', I couldn't tell if the last 2 numbers were 6, 8, or 0. I definitely found that car suspicious… but nobody else did, other than my uncle," Sakurako-san says, indifferently. Her voice is quiet, and her face lacks any expression.

"..."

"When my uncle suggested an autopsy, my mother shook her head. She said she didn't like the idea of a scalpel cutting into Soutarou's dead body. My grandfather also didn't want one. My father didn't argue with them. They ended up calling Soutarou's death an accident. But even now, I don't think that child fell into the pond. It was an incident involving a third party."

"Why do you think so?"

"I've already decided! Soutarou was a wise child. Asahikawa is a city of rivers. Everyone was always telling him about how dangerous water is. When we went on walks with gran, he always held my hand tightly, and never wanted to approach water. That's why there's no way he could have lost his life by falling into the pond alone… but only my uncle believed me." Sakurako-san says, forcing the words out of her throat.

For a moment, I thought that maybe this is just a "reason" Sakurako-san made up because she couldn't deal with the sadness. It's not very credible. But on the other hand, it's

Sakurako-san. She wouldn't come to a conclusion with just her imagination and ego. So I'm sure… her uncle and her really believe it.

"I also believe you, Sakurako-san," I say, clearly.

She smiles at me. However, it's a lonely smile rather than a happy one. I think I've seen it before, but I can't remember right now. However, when the light from the car in the oncoming lane illuminates the dark road, I look at her face, dyed orange by the light, and realize it. Ah, it was that time. The first time we parted with each other.

"...If you weren't here, I would have killed Mitsuura while being controlled by Hanabusa. I honestly don't have any sure proof that he killed my brother. Even if I think the car was suspicious, if I'm the only one… Anyway, did you send an email to Hanabusa?"

"No… He seems like he already deleted the account he sent it from. Even if I tried to send one, it wouldn't send."

It was as easy as deleting the account for me to lose sight of Phantom. It's truly terrifying that I thought I was talking to Sakurako-san this entire time. It felt so natural to talk to him. Now that I think back, he was cleverly getting me to tell him information.

"...What's wrong?" Sakurako-san asks me, sounding worried. I didn't even notice she was staring at me.

"It's nothing…" I mumble my answer, just brushing her off. My heart is full of anxiety.

Phantom's words keep repeating in my head.

"Your body isn't just your own. You have to take care of it. I sincerely want you to grow a set of healthy bones."

You aren't your own? I sincerely hope? Various theories and speculations cloud my mind. What if he really does want my bones, and he wasn't just pretending in that email? Remembering that gives me an unfamiliar uneasy sensation that feels prickly in my head.

'I want you to share some of your strength to protect both me, and Sakurako-san.' Will my wish reach you in heaven, Soutarou-kun?

Epilogue

Almost a month after leaving the hospital, every time I lay in my bed I feel special. I feel a deep relief and joy over being in my own home. I even love my pillow cover that gets fabric pills. My first time being hospitalized since I was born was boring. Even though Shouko-san made sure to prepare a private room for me, it was too lonely, and I couldn't wait to go home. I even had surgery. I know it couldn't be helped, but not being able to move freely made me feel like my body wasn't my own.

But I suddenly got a high fever. I was worried I might die, so it made me anxious about a lot of things. It's no exaggeration to say that Phantom helped me survive my hospitalization. I woke up after horrible nightmares several times. I was shaking so much, and so scared that I couldn't talk.

It wasn't my mom, Imai, Kougami, my friends from school, my teachers, or even Sakurako-san who saved me from my boredom. It was Phantom. Thanks to Phantom, I returned to my normal daily life. That's an undeniable fact.

I open the email folder. There's no new messages from Phantom. I feel regretful and scared when I reread the messages, now that I know Hanabusa's true intentions. Whose bones is he going to try to get? I timidly open the folder.

Did you see it? A woman's corpse was discovered in Saitama this morning, but the details were kept hidden.

Yes, it was terrible. It seems a bit strange for it to have been hidden like that.

I saw it on the evening news. It was weird, since I'm used to seeing the gender, age, and name of the victim. Seeing pictures that were clearly taken in a photo booth, or from their social media… Why do people lose their privacy after they die? The dead have no dignity. They can't think or feel anymore.

But what about the feelings of my family members left behind? It makes my chest hurt.

The fact that Japanese society doesn't treat bereaved families kindly isn't a new thing. Although we pay our respects to the dead, it's a country where the weak are scorned. It's country where victims of sexual assault are blamed for being careless. They can't do things like consider the bereaved family. They won't take crimes seriously if their clothes aren't in disarray, the body isn't hidden, or the perpetrator was likely someone close to the victim. People only care about wrapping up the case quickly. Of course, there's times where a corpse is abandoned without thinking about it… in which case, it was probably done by an acquaintance.

What makes you say that?

Murders are generally committed by acquaintances. Statistics from a study done in America show that 80% of homicides are committed by acquaintances. People kill those that they already know. It's like they can't help it.

The rate of someone committing sexual crimes against an acquaintance is under 20%, but if you only look at sexual assault, it's around 30%. The urge to commit cruel or violent acts

against someone may spring up just because you know them. You should also make sure you're careful. It's possible that both people who you do and don't know could be after your life.

Please don't say scary things like that. I don't want to think about things like that. I'm just an ordinary person, nothing like that would happen.

A person's true feelings aren't always as simple to understand as you'd think. All it takes is the black poison of hatred to make someone throw away their common sense. Just because you don't want to acknowledge it doesn't mean it's untrue. Death is always close to humans. Of course, that does for you as well. It's inside of you. Darkness lurks around every corner.

What would you do if someone important to you fell victim to a crime? If the law didn't make the correct judgement, would you be able to accept that? Do you get it? Darkness is born from deep in one's heart. The law isn't always just. Justice only truly exists inside people.